

Take Me Home Tonight by halfempty

Series: Yourself or Someone Like You (aka Steve and Billy are In Love) [2]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: (eventually haha), Anal Fingering, Anal Sex, Gen, I must protect him, M/M, ROLLERWORLD, Sexual Content, This is explicit for a reason, actually I ... guess this is my s4, also! Dustin is an annoying gay ally!, but not that much bc I have no patience for that, domestic abuse, he also loves billy, mentions of past physical abuse, mild-to-moderate homophobia, mild-to-moderate language (aka teenagers talk like teenagers), past mentions of domestic abuse, steve is a sad bisexual loser, this has so much plot i'm sorry, this is the season 3 fic where Steve actually knows what Star Wars is

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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Summary:

Steve wondered when he'd gotten so goddamn stupid. Probably the exact moment Billy had first kissed him; all the brain cells had flown right out of his ear. Billy Hargrove was definitely the worst thing that had ever happened to him, he decided.

1. Chapter One

Author's Note:

This is a sequel to my monster Billy/Steve story, Yourself or Someone Like You. It's really dramatic; this one is too. You should probably read that one first.

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by halfempty

Chapter One

Mom and Aunt Mary were getting drunk out on the back deck. Steve was being tortured.

Steve drank his drink, then finished it. He'd been sprawled out on a lawn chair out here with them for about two hours now. They'd been out there for longer; Mom had came back inside at three to drag Steve out of the house. He'd been basically hiding inside for days and Mom said she wanted to make sure he wasn't turning into a vampire. Steve's mom always said the corniest crap and acted like she was hilarious; really she exhausted him.

They'd been at Aunt Mary's for three days now, since Tuesday morning when his mom had came downstairs and saw Steve sitting at the breakfast table in the kitchen looking like a total zombie. He'd been all screwed up when he'd came home on Monday night after his fight with Billy. He'd came in and thrown one of the bar stools from the kitchen across the room; he hadn't known his mom had been right there in the living room. She'd came running in and asked him what was wrong but he hadn't told her; she'd asked him three times.

She'd looked so upset. Well what passed for upset for her anyway; she was something else.

It'd been three whole months and he hadn't even told her about him and Bill or what they were doing – not the fight or anything of course but just him and Billy. How could he? He couldn't find the words to tell her.

Crap everything was so wrong. Apparently he didn't know what the hell they were doing after all. It hadn't even really been a real fight; Steve felt so sick thinking about it. Billy had had a total meltdown on him.

Billy'd said they weren't together but they were together, at least Steve had thought. It was more than hooking up. They didn't really talk about it but they'd been hooking up and they were together. Monday had been June first so it'd really been three months but Billy didn't think so. He'd been a huge fucking asshole.

He'd said shit like *You think I want you?* and *How long do you think we can do this for?* Four days later and Steve was still thinking about all the awful shit Billy'd screamed at him and the – the things he'd called Lucas when the kid'd walked into the gym and found them together. It was so bad. Even now it made him sick thinking about it and he'd slugged Bill in the face and that made him feel sick too. He actually felt hollow, like someone had come along and scooped all his insides out.

Three of his knuckles had been purple until yesterday; he'd hit Bill really hard. He felt so bad about hitting him. He couldn't stop thinking about it. He'd even cried in his bed a little on Monday night like a baby or something, thinking about it. Billy always said he was too emotional for him; Steve guessed he'd really meant it. Bill always said a bunch of shit he didn't mean when he got mad but maybe he'd really meant it this time.

Steve'd looked so sick the next morning that his mom'd got all fussy said he should call out of work. He didn't think he could go to work anyway so he'd called out, then he'd called out for the rest of the week too. Even if his dad owned the place he still had to call out and ask for time off like a regular drone. He'd been working there for almost a year now and he'd never called out though.

Linda worked in the front office; she'd sounded worried about him on

the phone when he'd called and she was gonna have a million questions when he came back. She probably missed him and stuff – she always said she was his work-mom which was okay as long as his real-mom never heard about it. She ate lunch with him and gave him all the gossip at the office.

Anyway that'd been when Mom had said he should come to Aunt Mary's with her. Mom worked at a publishing house out in Logansport four days a week and that was way out past Indianapolis. Aunt Mary was closer for her and she liked to stay there sometimes; Steve wasn't a kid anymore and he didn't need her around all the time.

Aunt Mary was cool though. Mom had said Steve could use a vacation so he'd come with her.

Steve wasn't really thinking about work or about Linda or about his mom and his aunt. By this point it'd been three days now – four? Three? Four if you counted Monday – and he kind of felt slightly less like he was gonna vomit up his heart at any second. Really he could even go about three minutes without thinking about Billy; he was doing okay.

This was one of the three minute intervals. The sun was too bright; Steve put the magazine he was reading over his face. It was the *New Yorker* because Aunt Mary was like that. Mom had let him have two margaritas; they were really strong.

The radio was too loud too. Mom and Aunt Mary had the republican radio on to make fun of it and they'd been talking shit about Reagan for an hour now; they were gettin' all loud. Talking shit on Reagan was about Mom's favorite thing to do, after nagging Steve and making really strong margaritas.

Aunt Mary went back inside to get more booze – it was Thursday and she said that that counted as the weekend so they could drink before six – and Steve's mom wandered over to him. She sat in the lawn chair next to him and petted his hair. She smelled good. "Are you feeling any better, my baby?"

Steve put the *New Yorker* more securely on his face so she couldn't

touch his hair anymore; Mom made a sound like he was being funny.

He was not being funny. The three minute interval was over and now he was thinking about Billy again. Not about the fight but about the other week when him and Steve had taken Max into the city. They'd been in the city together before (Indianapolis was the big one, but Eastgate and Bloomington too) but not with Max.

Max and Billy had said they would take him to California, maybe over the summer. Max said they could take Steve down the Pacific Coast Highway (the PCH, Steve had looked it up) to all the cool beaches and Billy'd said that Max had never even been down the coast. It'd been a really good day; he liked to be around Max and Billy when they were getting along pretending not to get along. Now it just made him feel real lonely.

"Sure," he said now.

Mom folded down a corner of the magazine to look at him; Steve squinted at her with one eye. She leaned over him. "So what does that mean?" she asked.

"What, I'm fine now."

"Are you really fine now, or just drunk?"

Jeez. She was so annoying. "I'm not drunk," Steve told her. "I can drink way more than that and not be drunk."

"Hm. Can you?" Mom asked all dangerous; Steve tried to pull the *New Yorker* back on his face. "Steven! Stop acting like a child, I'm speaking to you."

"You just called me your baby."

"You are my baby. My handsome adult baby, who I am trying to talk with."

"So talk to me." He could feel her giving him a look so finally he took the magazine off his face; the sun hurt his eyes. He wasn't really that handsome.

He'd left his sunglasses at home. He'd even bought a new pair the other week too. That'd been when he'd gone out with Max and Billy though so it was probably better that he didn't have 'em.

"Now you have newsprint on your face," Mom told him.

"No I don't." That only happened with newspapers and only sometimes anyway. Not that he made a habit of putting newspapers over his face or whatever. Once he'd fallen asleep at the breakfast table and woken up with sports statistics on his cheek. One time!

"I just wanted to see if you were feeling better. I'm worried about you."

"What, I'm fine."

Mom looked down at him and put her hand in his hair again. She was taller since she was sitting up in her chair and Steve was flopped out like a fish. She looked so pretty like she usually did; people always said Steve looked like his mom which was annoying unless it was Billy calling him pretty boy or something. Actually that had been annoying too but it stopped being annoying once he'd found out Billy had really thought he was pretty.

His mom frowned at him suddenly; he was probably making a face. "Sweetheart, I won't know how to help you unless you tell me what's wrong," she said. "Can't you tell me what's happened?"

Steve's throat felt tight and his eyes hurt. Jesus he was getting all choked up or something. He missed his mom; she wasn't around that much anymore and she'd been mad at him last year. He wished he had something good to tell her. He'd even been thinking about ways he could tell her about him and Bill lately; he was so fucking stupid. "Nothing happened, I'm tired. I'm tired from work all the time."

"Hm." She kept petting his hair; she'd been sad when he'd got a haircut last month. Dad had said he looked like a hippie. Her eyes narrowed. "Is it that girl again?"

"Oh, my god, no!" He'd gone out with Nancy for a year and Mom still called her *that girl* and made comments. But now it'd been way over a

year that he hadn't been with Nancy. "I just said it's work! It's nothing about her, I barely even see her."

"Are you being sexually harassed in the workplace?"

"Oh my – you're so annoying, go back to your booze," Steve said; Mom laughed at him.

"I'm not joking!" she said; she was still laughing though. She really thought she was too funny.

"What if I really was? You'd still be laughing at me, that's so screwed up."

"No I wouldn't."

"You're so mean, you think I couldn't be harassed or something?" Steve asked her. He felt grouchy now. "I could be so harassed, all the girls wanna harass me but they know better."

"I'm sure they do, I'm not disputing that." Mom looked like he was amusing her; he liked her looking like that even though she was annoying and the worst. She wasn't really the worst.

Steve took her drink out of her other hand. It was even stronger than the ones she'd given him; he made a face. "I'm gonna go back to work tomorrow anyway." He'd called out all week but he could still show up. There was no one there to fix the copy machine for Linda; he was needed.

"I thought you were going to stay the weekend with me."

Steve was a real momma's boy – he could admit it – but he didn't think even he could handle Mom and Aunt Mary for like six whole days. He'd just wanted to get away from home; Billy had always been over and everything made Steve think about him. "Yeah, but I, I should go back."

"You won't be too hungover?"

"Ma, it's like five o'clock."

“Do you want me to come back with you?”

Steve thought about it. “No, that’s okay.”

“But I like spending time with you.”

“You didn’t spend time with me, I was layin’ in the rec room for three days.” Aunt Mary’s basement was fancy; her house wasn’t as big as theirs but it was fun to be somewhere else. Well not fun but okay.

“Well, yes, but I could sense your brooding presence,” Mom said; Steve made a face at her. “I can come home early on Sunday, will you go somewhere with me?”

“Yeah, whatever you want.”

Mom messed up his hair some more. Well it was already messed up probably. She touched the side of his face. “Are you going to see Billy this weekend? Maybe he can cheer you up.”

Boom, back to feeling hollow. Steve’s mom liked Billy which was too weird; they both thought the other was hilarious. He didn’t know how to tell her that Billy probably wouldn’t be hangin’ around anymore.

“Yeah, maybe.” He drank the rest of her drink.

He left early the next morning and drove straight to work; it took him about two hours to get there. Dustin’s mom had a spare key to his house and Dustin had been dogsitting while Steve’d been away so he didn’t have to worry about the dogs or anything. He missed them though and they were probably mad at him. Really Dustin had said he’d house-sit and not just dog-sit; Steve could already envision the mess.

Everyone in the office was happy to see him aside from Deborah who was kind of a bitch and they all said hey to him. Linda came into the back office three times from up front to check on him while he did his filing. Billy always laughed and said that Linda was Steve’s secretary; he seemed to think that Steve was some kinda hotshot at

work even though Steve'd told him like four times he was basically a paper pusher. Damn he couldn't even be at work and not think about Billy.

He ate lunch in the basement with Linda. They usually ate down there unless everybody wanted to go out or something. Linda was looking at him in a weird way; she gave him half her sandwich so he gave her the chips he'd bought from the vending machine upstairs.

Linda was arranging her little apple slices on a napkin. She had really thick blonde hair that she permed out about once a month and it was real crazy today since it was so humid. She kinda looked like an older version of Carol Kane; Steve only knew who that was because she'd been in some horror movie from the 70s that Billy liked. *When a Stranger Comes Calling* or something, he was pretty sure that was it. Steve didn't really like horror movies that much but lately when they'd watched them alone together Billy'd put his arm around him during the scary parts so Steve was deciding that they were okay. But apparently that was just bullshit too.

Linda stared at him while he sat sulking and thinking everything was bullshit. Billy was total bullshit. "You still don't look too good, honey."

Steve ate his sandwich. "My favorite thing about you is how you always compliment me, Linda, makes me feel great," he said; Linda laughed at him.

"You look okay, I'm just saying, you just look sad," she said. "Did something happen at home?" She knew his dad could be a real prick – she'd been working for him for eleven years.

"No, I was sick."

Linda leaned on the table. "How sick?" she asked him in an annoying voice.

"I dunno."

She gave him a big look. "Lovesick?" she guessed. Jeez she was starting her crap.

Steve felt guilty; he hadn't told her about Billy being Billy of course but really he'd told her all about Billy. He'd told her he was seeing someone a couple weeks ago. He didn't know if he should do that but he couldn't help himself. Linda was always tryin' to fix him up with her niece or with one of the young girls that worked upstairs with him and he'd felt bad.

Well he hadn't felt bad; he'd felt good. He'd been – really happy. He'd wanted to tell someone; it was okay if it was Linda at work. Billy made him really happy. He'd been staying over more and more and it wasn't like – they weren't just hooking up. They didn't even do sexy stuff every time or anything. Okay most times but not always. Billy had this really sweet grin in the mornings; he was unbelievable. He was getting an apartment in two weeks and he'd told Steve before *You're like half the reason why I wanna get a place.*

Steve'd thought they'd been doing so well. Apparently that was all bullshit too. Steve loved bullshit; he ate it up.

He hadn't said anything for a couple minutes; Linda frowned at him when he looked up at her.

Jeez but she made him feel so bad. He hadn't really wanted to go and work for his dad last year when he'd graduated and he'd been a real prick when he started at the office. Linda had been the first person who was nice to him even though he was a dick all the time and that had made him want to be nicer to her. She was maybe fifty and divorced so she was pretty lonely; everyone at the office talked about how her husband had left her. Steve'd bought her a chain for her glasses last summer because she was always losin' them up front and she hadn't left him alone since.

She was still frowning at him. "No, I'm okay."

"Everything still going good with your girlfriend?"

Okay so there was one big detail about Billy he'd left out. It was so hard; he didn't have anyone to talk to about Billy. Billy had Max to talk all about Steve with apparently; Steve had Linda at work. He hadn't even made up a fake name for Bill or anything.

“We kinda – got into a fight,” Steve told her; he didn’t think she’d want to know that Billy was a guy and not this real religious girl from two towns over. “It was, uh, pretty bad.”

“Oh, honey. What happened?” She looked all mom-like and sad for him.

“I don’t know. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“You should talk about it, you’ll feel better,” Lin said; Steve knew she just wanted the gory details. Anyway he did want to tell someone the gory details. He didn’t know how to though.

“They just – uh, one of our friends found out we were seein’ each other, it was this big thing.”

That was an understatement. He’d really thought Bill was going to *kill* Lucas. He’d thrown Lucas around and called him the n-word; Steve’d never really even heard somebody say that in his life. Okay a couple times at school or whatever but it’d never been, like – someone he *knew* saying it.

He hadn’t really known Billy was like that. He knew Bill’s *dad* was. And there had been that whole thing last year when he’d thrown Lucas around and beat the crap out of Steve – Max had told Steve that Billy said Lucas was *the wrong kind of people* for her to hang around with; all it’d done was make her hang around Lucas even more.

Steve still didn’t like to think about it and Billy never really talked about it. He just hadn’t really thought he was like that. You couldn’t even say the n-word on TV and you could say ‘hell’ and ‘damn’ on the TV after 9pm. It was really bad. Billy’d said it a lot of times; he’d said it once or twice to the kid’s face and then he’d said it more to Steve to make him mad.

He still didn’t really know why Billy’d wanted to make him mad. He’d also seemed like he was trying to get Steve to hit him and Steve didn’t know why he’d do that either though.

He had, though. Hit him. He felt like total crap about it; he hadn’t

meant to do that. Billy got enough shit from his dad at home and Steve knew he didn't even know half of it. He never wanted to treat Bill that way but he'd just been so mad.

Anyway Linda didn't need to know that Steve'd hit him or what Billy'd said about Lucas. She was just frowning at him in a kind of confused way.

"Okay, well, what's the problem, honey? Who cares if your friends know?"

"Uh – " There was a million things he couldn't say; his head felt all spin-y. "They just – don't wanna tell anybody yet."

He'd told Linda that before and she thought it was a crock of shit; she narrowed her watery blue eyes at him. "Who wouldn't want to tell somebody about you, sweetheart? You're the full package."

"Okay, okay." He needed to stop her before she started on extolling his virtues; really he wasn't so great like Linda thought. She didn't know anything about him really. "It's not, it doesn't matter."

"Is she Catholic or something?"

Steve didn't know what Billy was. "No, I don't think so."

"Hm." Linda narrowed her eyes even more; they were gonna disappear behind her big glasses. "Younger than you? You know, you could do a lot better than going around wi – "

"No, Lin, he's the same age as me," Steve said in exasperation and then realized he was a huge moron. He heard the slip-up as soon as it left his mouth and froze. *Fuck*.

Linda froze too with an apple slice halfway to her mouth; she looked like a comic strip or something.

"I didn't – I wasn't – "

He wondered if she'd start screaming. Shit. Linda was basically an old lady; she had to be fifty-five if she was a day. He didn't know what all she thought about stuff like that. God she probably didn't even

know two guys could be together-together like that. Crap. Crap. His stupid mouth. Bill always told him, his fucking mouth –

“I mean, she’s not – “

Linda put her apple slice down on her little napkin and fiddled with it. Her watery blue eyes were real big behind her glasses. She tucked the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth for a moment. “Well,” she said finally; she wasn’t looking at him. “That’s different then.”

Linda’d yelled at him for forever; she yelled at him for about six minutes. She said he’d made her feel real stupid; she wouldn’t have tried to set him up with her niece if she knew he was a homosexual. Steve told her he wasn’t a homosexual; he just liked one guy really. Linda had said she wouldn’t tell his dad; she’d promised. Then she’d got all annoying asking if she knew who the guy was.

“Lin, why would you know him,” Steve had said. He’d been looking all around the basement; the little alcove by the steps looked like a good place to crawl to and die in.

Linda wanted to know if he was seeing that handsome fella that had picked him up a couple times over the winter when his car broke down; Steve had said yeah he was. She knew Billy was his friend from around town.

“What was his name? Riley?”

Ew. What? That was the worst name ever; they weren’t in Iowa or something. “No, his name’s Billy.”

“Billy the mechanic,” Linda’d said; she was all aglow with her newest gossip. She said that Billy looked like one of those fancy guys on that MTV. Actually Steve had thought that right there at the tabletop was a good place to die too.

“Yeah, sure, Billy the mechanic, he’s a real prick to me.”

Linda had wanted to know all the details so he’d told her a few, leaning over the table and watching the steps to make sure no one

was coming down. They talked in hushed voices. It sucked to tell someone about the fight they'd had and it felt good too; he didn't have anyone to talk to about Billy.

Linda leaned back against the table; she'd looked like she wanted to be drinking a cocktail. She'd been wincing in sympathy. "You know, I have a nephew who's homosexual, it's so hard for them."

"Oh, my god, please stop saying *homosexual*, actually, actually please stop saying *anything-sexual* – "

"He probably got scared, baby. What were you guys doing at the high school?"

"He still goes there, he's my age but he's a senior," Steve told her.

He felt like total crap again; he'd made Billy meet him after his basketball game. Bill hadn't wanted to hook up there but Steve had wanted to see him. Not just see him but he'd wanted to hook up; Steve couldn't help himself from being a total fucking horndog around Billy most of the time. Bill had said *No, man, I don't know*, and *What about the kids?* and Steve had said *It's fine, there's no one here* like a little idiot. He'd gotten them caught even though he hadn't meant to; he was too stupid. Billy had a right to be mad at him even though he hadn't needed to be such a prick to him.

Linda'd asked him a couple more questions and Steve could tell he'd got her feeling all bad for Billy. Bill still lived at home, he'd told her, he was moving out as soon as he was graduating. He was staying in Hawkins for his kid sister Max and for Steve. Billy's dad was a real prick and he'd kill him and maybe Steve too if he ever found out about them. Linda wanted to know if he'd tried to talk to Billy since and Steve said no; he already knew what happened when you tried to talk to Billy when he was mad. Sometimes he yelled at you and pushed you out a window. Then their lunch hour was over and Steve was freed from the twenty questions.

He still kind of couldn't believe she wasn't freaking out. "Do you think I'm totally weird now?" he asked her as they went back upstairs.

"I always thought you were totally weird." Linda smiled at him. She thought she was crazy-hilarious too. She patted his arm and then yanked his tie which was annoying; she always messed 'em up. "You'll be okay, Steve. You'll work it out."

"Yeah, thanks." He didn't know.

Usually Steve left early on Fridays; since he hadn't been there for most of the week he hung around until everyone'd finished. A couple people left early too and they were done by three-thirty anyway. He felt weird the rest of the day even though everyone else was acting normal. He carried Linda's stuff out to her car like usual; by Friday she'd always accumulated all this junk that she said she needed to take home.

He just felt weird. He wondered if this was how you felt when you 'came out' or something; that was what they called it on TV and stuff. It hadn't been that bad but Steve knew not everyone would be like Linda.

Anyway it wasn't like it even mattered that she knew he was bisexual or anything. He didn't even have a stupid boyfriend anymore. He didn't know if he'd ever want another guy who wasn't Billy. Probably he was being dramatic but that was because everything still hurt so much right now.

He looked at his reflection in the big window in the stairwell as he left work; he looked like a sad stupid bisexual loser. His tie had cactuses on it. Oh. Cacti. He knew that. Cac-tie, okay he got it. He helped Linda take her stuff out to her car.

Steve knew what bisexual was; one of his aunts was gay so he knew about that stuff. Well not his aunt but it was his mom's cousin on her mom's side. They were real close like mom was with Aunt Mary so she was Steve's aunt.

She lived out in Pennsylvania and always sent him really ugly shirts for his birthday and Christmas. She sent him two separate ugly shirts for his birthday and for Christmas which was cool. Most people didn't

do that. Dad didn't like her but he didn't like most of Mom's family; he said they were East Coast liberals. Steve and his mom had been out there to visit her a few years ago and he'd even seen two guys kiss at her house (and a lot of girls kiss which had been real interesting in his 13 year-old mind. Actually it was still real interesting in his 19 year-old mind). So it was just this thing he knew some people did. You didn't get murdered for it all the time like Billy thought.

When he got home it was past four and the house was empty. He guessed Dustin either hadn't come over yet or he'd been here already. Or maybe Lucas had told the rest of the kids about him and Billy and Dustin was totally freaking out.

He didn't know whether Dustin would freak out or not. Well probably he'd freak out more so because it was Billy and not because Steve was seeing a guy.

Steve never really thought about stuff like that; maybe that made him stupid like Billy said. He just knew he wanted to be with Bill and people could either deal with it or they wouldn't. Not like he was jumping to tell people or take Bill out to his Prom or something but they could deal with it.

The dogs were sprawled out in the front hallway and they came running to sniff him when he came in. They were German Shepherds and he'd got them for his twelfth birthday so they were seven now which wasn't too old. He'd named them Luke and Leia after Star Wars because he'd been twelve and a dork. Luke was bigger and had a dark face; Leia was smaller and lighter because she was a beautiful space princess.

Leia was definitely mad at him; she only sniffed him twice and wagged her tail a little. She didn't lick at his hand even when he talked to her in a baby voice. She gave him a long look and then went and sat by the front door in a mournful way. Luke went to the door too.

"What, do you want to go out?" Steve asked them; they just looked at him. "Are you waitin' for Billy?" he asked; they wagged their tails.

Jesus H Christ. His own dogs. Honestly he felt betrayed. “He’s not coming, you can lay there all day,” Steve told them.

He left his dogs to be total traitors. In the kitchen they still had food in their bowls so maybe Dustin had been here already. He checked the fridge; Dust had drank all the sodas and all the milk too. He’d left the empty carton in there because he was a little shit.

He checked the messages on the answering machine; it was just Dustin callin’ him on Tuesday afternoon before he’d known that Steve wasn’t home and then some telemarketer on Wednesday talking about solar panels. Nancy had called yesterday to say that Dustin had told her that Steve wasn’t feeling well and that she was thinking of him.

Steve deleted the messages; he felt the hollow scooped-out feeling again. It was funny that Nancy was calling him and kind of hanging around him now when he didn’t really want her anymore. Mom had said that people always wanted you as soon as you didn’t want them and maybe she’d been right. He didn’t really think Nancy wanted him again but he’d have killed to have her call him up last year, maybe even six months ago.

It was just that he was too stupid and he’d thought maybe Billy – that maybe he would have called for him or something. Even though he was still mad and he didn’t know what to do about the Lucas thing he’d still thought that maybe Billy’d call. He’d hoped he guessed. If Billy cared enough he could have even called Steve at his aunt’s house; all he’d have had to do was ask Dustin about it.

He guessed Billy hadn’t cared enough. Steve had thought he might and he didn’t know why he’d thought that. He didn’t know why he’d thought Billy would have called anyway. Billy hated apologizing and he rarely did it. He hated admitting he was wrong.

Maybe Billy didn’t even think he was wrong anyway. Steve didn’t really know what Billy thought he guessed. Anyway he was being a total idiot, standing around like some fragile girl, wishing the guy he liked would call him.

Did he still like Billy?

Jeez. He tried to tell himself he didn't know but he guess he knew. If Bill came to him and said they could talk it out or if he said sorry Steve'd take him back in two seconds; it was too pathetic. He didn't know what to do about the stuff Billy'd said to Lucas but they could work it out. Maybe that made Steve a not-so-great person or something too.

Anyway it didn't matter. Billy was never going to come around and apologize. It'd been like five days already almost. He wondered if Bill even noticed –

The phone rang and startled him out of his thoughts; Steve fumbled for the line and knocked the receiver off the hook. He grabbed it before it hit the ground. "Hello?"

"Steve!"

Oh. It was just Dustin. "Hey, man," Steve said glumly.

"Hey! Are you back?"

"How else could I be answering the phone."

"Okay, good point, good point," Dustin said. He sounded like normal: happy and a little annoying. "I didn't know if I was supposed to come over tonight for Lucas and Leia, no one picked up at your aunt's house!"

"Yeah, I was gonna call you."

"So do you need me to come over tonight?"

Steve rubbed his forehead. "I – no, it's fine, I'm home now."

"Okay, but ... so can I come over tonight?" Dustin asked him.

"What, you want to?" Steve felt surprised. "Is Becca busy?" That was Dustin's girlfriend.

"No, she's not busy, I am the ONLY ONE she hangs out with!" Dustin went off. "I want to hang out with you, my friend, Steve! I haven't seen you in like two weeks!"

Oh. Really that made him feel kind of good. “You just want to eat all my food, shithead.”

“I ate it all already,” Dustin told him severely; Steve smiled. “Your milk was going bad anyway, I did you a favor. STEVE!” he said. “Can we get Chinese food? I have lots of stuff to tell you.”

“Sure, if you want.”

“From the place on Broad Street, their wontons are better,” Dustin lectured.

The apartment Billy was going to be getting was on Broad Street; Steve wondered if he was gonna have to avoid the good Chinese food place for the rest of his life now. “Yeah, I know where to go.”

“But ONLY if the older lady’s working – “

“Dustin, yeah, okay.”

“Okay, is Billy going to be over there later? Because I still owe him a Mark McGwire card and I’m trying to avoid the confrontation that’s gonna happen when he finds out that I don’t actually own a Mark Mc – “

Steve guessed Lucas hadn’t really told anyone about what had happened yet. Maybe Max; he couldn’t see him not telling Max. It’d been all week so Steve didn’t get it.

Okay but Lucas was cool enough and had always been cool with him. Steve could see him maybe not telling everyone that he’d seen Steve and Billy making out in the gym but he didn’t get why Lucas wouldn’t have told at least Dustin that Billy’d been a total dickbag to him; it didn’t make any sense.

Dustin talked on and on. Steve leaned on the counter and listened to him. He talked for so long that his mom yelled at him that he was running the phone bill up again. “OKAY, JESUS CHRIST!” Dustin hollered.

“Dusty! Do you even hear me?” Steve heard his mom goin’ off in the background.

“Son of a bitch,” Dustin muttered; the line cracked. “Hey Steve, can come you pick me up? WHAT? I KNOW. OKAY! OKAY, OKAY! Steve, my mom says hi.”

Being back at home made him too depressed even though he still had Dustin to hang out with and even though they watched *Raiders of the Lost Ark* which was the best Indy film. Harrison Ford was so cool.

Dustin talked a lot during the movie like he usually did. He was really stressing himself out about the Mark McGwire baseball card; he said that Billy was gonna kick his butt and that he was lucky it hadn't happened yet. “He was totally hungover during study hall, I crawled over to Rebecca's table to get a sandwich – “

“What, why was he hungover?”

Dustin looked miffed at his important story being interrupted. “I don't know. He's been going to parties all week, you missed a lot of good ones. Stacey Houser said he was totally trashed at her house last night.”

That was so great. Bill was such a fuckface and Steve was such an idiot. He'd hid out at his aunt's house for three days practically fucking crying over him and Billy was just out getting loaded.

Steve wondered when he'd gotten so goddamn stupid. Probably the exact moment Billy had first kissed him; all the brain cells had flown right out of his ear. Billy Hargrove was definitely the worst thing that had ever happened to him, he decided. He leaned back on the couch and let Dustin keep on talking; he wasn't really listening though.

He drove Dust home past midnight and then it was back to his big empty house. He almost kinda wished he'd told his mom to come home. The long weekend stretched out in front of him; he didn't know what the hell he was going to do.

Jeez he could barely even remember what he'd used to do before he and Billy had started hanging out all the time. Even before they'd started hooking up they'd been together a lot. He'd been real lonely

and he guessed he was going to be lonely again. It totally sucked.

He laid in his bed for a long time; it was hard to fall asleep without Billy there which was dumb too. It wasn't like he'd stayed over all the time or anything. Maybe once or twice a week but on the weekends too. It was weird to think of a weekend without Bill; they always had something they were doing even if it was just fucking around at Steve's house.

His pillow kind of smelled like Billy which made him feel even worse; it was a good thing he hadn't been home all week. The pillow smelled like cigarettes and cologne and whatever other scent Billy had that made him smell like just Billy. It made Steve feel really sad. He wasn't even really mad anymore, mostly sad.

Now that he was truly alone with no one else to distract him or bug him he just laid around replaying their stupid fight in his head. Billy'd been so mad after Lucas had found them; he said that if Lucas told his dad he was fucking dead. Steve had said *Yeah, I really doubt Lucas Sinclair is running to talk to your father*; that'd made Billy even madder.

He said – jeez, he'd said so much shit; Steve didn't really even remember it all. He'd asked Steve how the kids were gonna feel when they found out that Steve was a faggot who liked sucking Billy's cock. He'd kept calling Steve a faggot and stuff; Steve didn't know why Billy was saying all that stuff like he hadn't been the one to start it with him and wreck his fucking life.

He knew that Bill'd been trying to make him mad and it had worked. The thing was that Billy was saying all that stuff like it didn't mean anything to him, like it was just some sex thing they were doing or whatever. It wasn't just some sex thing.

Steve had yelled some stuff too; he thought he'd called Billy a coward or something like that and he'd yelled *YOU NEVER EVEN SAID YOU LIKED ME* like a huge baby.

Even then Billy hadn't even been able to say it. Well he'd been mad and all but he hadn't even been able to say it. Bill was such a huge flirt and he acted like he was so experienced but he'd told Steve

before he hadn't even been with that many people either. The way he acted sometimes, Steve knew it had to mean something to him even if he never said it.

Then he'd said – damn, Steve couldn't even really remember what Bill had said that'd made him so mad. He just kept on saying his shit; he kept on pushing him. He'd said more stuff about Steve dropping to his knees like a faggot to suck his cock or something and it was just the way he kept saying it like it was nothing. That'd made Steve real mad and he'd socked Billy in the jaw; he'd just wanted him to shut the hell up. They'd started everything with a fight back almost two years ago and now it felt like they'd ended it with one too.

Crap it sucked so bad. He hadn't meant to hit him. Steve put the pillow over his face. It still smelled like Billy; maybe he'd suffocate here. Billy had gotten beat on his whole life and sometimes he acted like he got off on it but Steve knew he wasn't really like that. He could be so sweet sometimes, weirdly thoughtful in this way he had if he thought he could get away with being nice without you noticing it.

There was just – it was like there was something about Billy that kind of made Steve want to protect him; Steve didn't know what it was. Even before they'd started hooking up he'd felt like that, well after he'd gotten to know him a little.

It hadn't taken that much. Billy could be so quiet sometimes; you wouldn't think a guy like Billy Hargrove would ever know to shut his mouth for two minutes. Steve always wondered what he was thinking.

Back before he'd gotten Luke and Leia Steve had cried and whined for a pet for years; finally when he was eleven his mom had taken him to the animal shelter and Steve'd seen this big orange tom cat he'd liked. It was real ugly and basically looked like a monster and part of its tail was missing but that was the one Steve'd wanted. Mom had put up a huge fuss but finally she'd said she guessed a cat was better than a dog anyway.

That cat kind of reminded him of Billy, bristling and miserable in its little cage. Well not that Billy was ugly at *all* but the way the cat had

acted. It was always puffing up and snarling and running away when you got too close to it. It had scratched Steve real bad a bunch of times, and Tommy and Carol kept coming over and scaring it by accident. Then one day it'd been on the couch real late at night purring; it'd stopped purring when Steve had came over but it finally let him pet it for the first time. Steve had thought it could be a real good cat if he could just get it to like him a little and see that everyone wasn't so bad. If he could just give it a good home or something. He'd been such a dumb little kid.

He hadn't even gotten a chance to name the cat; he'd had it for like two weeks and then one day it'd got out by mistake when his dad had been leaving for work. They'd found it out in the road all squashed the next day. Steve had kind of cried a little and Tommy hadn't even made fun of him; Carol helped him bury it in Wrigley Park. Steve's mom had yelled and said they were gonna get a fine if anyone found out he and Carol had buried it out there and Steve'd gotten mad at her. Then a couple months later he'd turned twelve and he'd gotten Luke and Leia and he hadn't let them get squashed in the road and he'd kind of forgotten about the cat.

He was thinking about it now though, and he'd thought about it a couple times before. Really the cat was just like Billy; he was always puffing up and snarling and running away whenever someone got too close to him. Steve had just wanted to be nice to him and show Billy that he didn't need to be like that all the time but he'd fucked that up too, just like with the stupid nameless cat.

He still couldn't believe he'd hit him; he'd told Billy before he'd never hit him. Billy'd even said it and Steve hadn't thought he'd remember. *Thought you wouldn't hit me like that.* His nose and his mouth had been bleeding and he'd been grinning like he'd gotten what he'd wanted.

Steve didn't know why he'd wanted that; he'd been totally frozen. He'd tried to say *I'm sorry* and *I didn't mean it* but he couldn't get the words out.

Bill hadn't really let him talk anyway though. He'd just spit some blood at him and told Steve he was done with him and went to leave. Steve'd tried to stop him and Billy'd screamed *DON'T FUCKING TOUCH ME* so Steve'd let him go.

God. Why'd he let him go. Now that he was just home by himself and it was days later Steve knew he shouldn't have let him go.

He knew Billy needed a couple days to cool down but he'd thought – well he didn't know what he'd thought. Even now there was a part of him that couldn't believe it was a Friday night and Billy wasn't here with him; he kept waiting to hear his loud stupid car on the street. Bill drove like a crazy person and he didn't know how to use his brakes. Steve was always telling him to slow down.

He wondered what Billy was doing; probably he wasn't thinking about Steve. He was probably out getting loaded again. Maybe he'd even hooked up with someone at a party or something; it really hurt but Steve could see Billy doing that if he was too mad at him. *You think I want you?* Maybe some real pretty girl or somebody who wasn't anything like Steve, maybe some real smart girl.

Jesus he felt so terrible thinking about Bill out with some girl. Or even some guy really, someone who was way smarter and better-looking than Steve. It made him so jealous and he felt sick again. Billy'd said before that he'd never been into any other guys either but Steve knew that Bill could get whoever he wanted in about a minute. It was dumb because he liked taking Billy out and stuff but there was always this part of him that got real worried that one time Bill was gonna look around and see he could do so much better than Steve.

He laid awake for a real long time thinking about all that crap. Finally he fell asleep at a little past three; he thought he'd probably dream about Billy or something but he didn't. He didn't dream at all for once.

He woke up in the morning still feeling blue. It was a few days into June and his neighbors were having some big block party like they did at the start of every summer. It was like the kick-off after Memorial Day because nobody liked grilling on Monday apparently. Last week Steve'd told Billy he should come to the block party; he

was pretty sure Billy wasn't going to come to the party.

Jesus Christ he couldn't keep thinking about Billy all the time; he couldn't think about him all weekend. He showered and got dressed and went downstairs. He made breakfast all alone in his big kitchen with Luke laying under the table looking at him hopefully and Leia still crashed out by the front door hopefully. She was a piece of work.

He ate his breakfast by himself in the living room, well not really alone because Luke followed him. He still looked hopeful even though Steve almost never gave him any human food. Mom said Luke had a weight problem which was so mean; he looked fine.

Steve sat and ate his breakfast; he watched the news on channel three like he usually did just to make sure nothing crazy was going down in Hawkins. Dustin always laughed at him but sometime you had to check the news in case something crazy was happening. Not like they'd ever for real report it if there was monsters or whatever but you could spot it if shit was going down.

Even though it was only eleven-thirty he could hear a bunch of people talking and laughing outside already. He wondered if Mr. Davis down the street was drunk already.

He let the dogs out back, then went and got the mail because there was nothing else to do and he sat on the steps looking at it. Indiana State University had mailed him another pamphlet because he'd sent out for an application a month ago.

He sat on the steps leafing through it for a while. The sky was grey and the air felt cold and heavy like it was going to rain. Not really a great day for a party or anything but already the whole street was lined with cars all the way down reaching the McClays' house. The houses on Steve's block were all really far apart and it was weird to see it like this; the street was almost always totally empty.

Steve read an article about summer courses. It was too late to get in for the summer semester and maybe even the fall but he guessed he really should think about going; he didn't want to be a townie for his whole life. Billy said that Steve could just keep working for his dad but he didn't really want to work for his dad. He didn't know what he

wanted to do; he always figured he'd just go off to school and then he'd have time to decide. But then he hadn't know what to do because Bill was still here in Hawkins and so he was going to stay in Hawkins, for a while at least. Steve was so stupid, trying to plan his life around some guy he'd been seein' for barely three months and who couldn't even tell Steve he liked him. It was just that –

“Steve?”

Steve looked up and almost dropped his stack of mail; Nancy Wheeler was standing in front of him about six steps away on the walkway.

“HEY, NANCE,” he said all loud like a moron. He felt surprised to see her. Well he hadn't been expecting to see anyone. He was glad he'd actually gotten dressed. “What, uh, what're you doing here?”

“Um, the ... party,” she said slowly and gestured behind her. She looked so out of place against the gray sky; she was wearing a blue-and-white dress that looked great on her and her favorite sweater. It was pink and her mom'd got it for her two years ago on her birthday. “Angela invited me, so ... “

“Oh, right.” Angela Davis lived down the street from him too. He wondered if Nancy knew that Billy bought weed off of Angela all the time. “Yeah, that sound be fun.”

“Are you going, now?” Nancy asked him. “I saw you just sitting here, so ... “

Steve laughed a little. “Uh, yeah, no, no I'm, I'm not going.”

Nancy twisted her face up into a cute smile. She always looked so nice and put together. Steve'd thought he wanted to marry her. “Steve, you *love* the block party!”

They'd gone together, not last summer but the one before it, and he'd seen her there last year when she'd been with Jonathan. Steve had gotten really loaded both times; maybe Nancy didn't remember that part.

“Yeah, I don't really feel like partying today.”

“Still don’t feel good?” She was looking at him in a fond way which was nice he guessed; he could tell by the way her eyes crinkled at the corners. He guessed he knew Nance still liked him even if she’d never really loved him like he’d loved her or wanted to be with him. “Hey, can I sit with you for a minute?”

“Yeah, sure.” He made room for her on the steps. He didn’t really know what to say to her and he didn’t really care anymore.

Nancy sat down next to him. They smiled at each other for a couple a seconds and no one said anything and it was awkward. Steve kind of wished she’d go away and leave him to be a brooding presence.

She pulled the stack of mail out of his hands and looked at it. “Oh, hey!” she said. “Okay, Indiana State, do you think you’re gonna go there?”

“Uh, I don’t. I don’t know. I was looking at it.”

“I might end up there with you, if you do go,” Nancy told him. “I ... did not get into Sarah Lawrence like I wanted.”

Steve didn’t know too much about schools but he knew Sarah Lawrence was in New York; she’d probably wanted to go there so she could be close to Jonathan. “Oh, I’m sorry, Nance.”

“I ... yeah, it, it sucks.” She looked pretty glum; Steve knew she didn’t want to stay in crappy Indiana for forever. She shook her head a little. “Sorry, we don’t have to talk about that. I didn’t know you were applying to schools too.”

“Yeah, some of them.” She didn’t need to know about all the ones he hadn’t gotten into (again). “It doesn’t matter. I mean I don’t even know what I want to do.”

She was smiling at him. “That’s, that’s kind of the point of school. To figure out what you want to do?”

“I guess so.”

“I think it would be really good if you went there,” Nancy told him. “You know, you’ve done so much this year, you’ve done really great,

Steve. I feel really proud of you.” She made a little face. “Sorry, is that patronizing?”

“No, not at all,” Steve said dryly; Nancy laughed and that made him smile. “No, it’s fine.”

She laughed some more which made him feel okay. Then they just sat for another couple seconds; Steve couldn’t really think of anything to say to her. He watched her play around with the sleeves of her sweater and wondered what all they’d used to talk about anyway, really.

“So I just,” he said as Nancy said, “So I was – “

They both laughed again. “Sorry, you go.”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t have anything to say.”

“Oh. Okay.” Nancy thought about it. She chewed on her lip. “How’s, um – how’s your mom doing?” she tried brightly. She usually did everything brightly; he liked that about her.

“She’s fine, she’s good,” Steve said. “She’s not home. She was drunk at my aunt’s house at like five o’clock the other day.”

Nancy laughed. “Funny, so was my dad. Not – at your aunt’s.”

“You sure? It’s kind of a hot spot,” Steve said.

She laughed again. She put her hand on his arm too; Steve stared at it blankly. “You’re an idiot,” she said.

She always called him that; it’d been like some thing they did. He hadn’t really minded before because it’d been flirting but now he kind of minded. He didn’t know if she was flirting with him now. Didn’t know why she would.

“Your dad’s been okay?” he asked her to change the subject. Mr. Wheeler wasn’t a dick like his dad but he wasn’t that great either. He drank a lot; Nancy said he was like a stranger.

Nancy looked less bright and he felt bad. Maybe he shouldn’t have

asked. "Sure, the same," she said. "He – he and Mike have been fighting a lot, it's the same as always. I don't, I don't know. Mike is just – he seems so mad at everything. He never talks to me anymore."

Maybe Mike would talk to her more if she hadn't spent the last year running around with Jonathan Byers, Steve thought; he didn't say it though. He definitely didn't need to say it.

That wasn't really fair anyway. He guessed he was kind of friends with Mike now. Embarrassing to be friends with a pack of kids but he guessed he was. He and Nancy'd been together for almost a year and Steve'd barely even talked to the kid until they'd broken up so he couldn't say anything.

He wasn't saying anything so Nancy said, "He probably talks to you more than me nowadays."

"Uh, that's debatable," Steve said like a nerd (also like Mike) which made Nancy laugh again. "I think he really just tolerates me for rides."

"That's not true. He likes your pool too." Steve smiled. "Um ... he did say that Eleven went to your house the other week? With, um, with – with Billy?"

Great, he didn't really want to talk about that. "No, he was already over, we went in the woods and found her." Really Billy'd found her; Steve'd just been along for the ride.

Nancy's eyes got big. "Oh my god, is she still doing that?"

"I, I guess," Steve said. "Yeah, it was like when we found her in the park that time, totally freaky." Nancy nodded; El'd been doing her freaky shit for a while. "But she was like way worse this time, she was like totally spaced out. Then she, you know, came too, she practically threw Billy across the kitchen –"

"God, are you serious? Was he okay?"

"Oh, yeah, he probably loved it," Steve told her. "He's, like, obsessed with all that crazy stuff she can do."

“Mike said that they get along. He’s really jealous.”

Steve laughed in surprise; now he had another thing to tease Mike about. Well if he could ever really talk about Bill again without it feeling like there was a huge lump in his throat. “I think, uh, she’s a little young for him.”

“Yeah, tell that to Mike,” Nancy said. Steve didn’t really answer her; they just sat there some more. After a moment Nance said, “You know, I wanted to come over and see you. I was kind of hoping you weren’t at the party yet.”

“Lucky you, I’m not at the party yet.”

“I see that.” She looked amused by him. She said, “I was just thinking about you.”

Okay so he’d gone from Nightmare-World straight into the Twilight Zone. He felt totally blank; he was pretty sure he was making some kind of stupid face. “Uh, why?”

Nancy looked over at him for a second. “What, I’m not allowed to think about you?” she asked.

Jesus H. “Uuuuuh,” Steve said like a moron. “No, you, you can think about me, you can tell me all about it.”

She laughed again; Steve guessed he was just so funny today. “Okay,” she said. She leaned over, then she leaned over some more. He wondered if he had something on his face. She should have pointed it out earlier.

Wow she was really close. She leaned over and kissed him.

Steve just sat there frozen like a statue or some idiot in a cartoon. He could feel his eyes bug out and his eyebrows rose up real high. After another second of him not moving Nancy pulled back; her eyes were wide too. “I just – “

“Okay, that was a big thought,” Steve said; that made her laugh again. She leaned over and kissed him again; he kissed her back because he had no clue what he was doing or what the hell was going

on. Her mouth was soft and her little cheek fit perfectly against his hand when he reached out to cup her face. She smelled like she always did, some kinda flowers. Tasted like she always did, sweet lip shine.

It was really nice; it was okay. It was OKAY?

He realized he was being an insane person and pulled away; he had a hand braced on her shoulder. "I, yeah, uh – I don't really – know what's going on here."

Her eyes were real big. "Sorry, was that not – ?"

"I, I, I meant tell me with, with, you know, your words," Steve babbled out. "It was, a, a joke."

Nancy laughed and looked embarrassed. "I'm – sorry – I thought – "

"No, uh, Nance, that's okay – "

"I didn't think – are you seeing someone ... or – ?"

Half of him felt hollow again and the other half felt annoyed. He felt really petty for a moment. He stood up and put his hands in his back pockets; he felt totally weird and too close to her. Of course Nancy'd think the only reason why he wasn't jumping to get with her would be because he was seeing somebody.

Which he guessed he wasn't. Anymore. "Nope, totally single," he said; he didn't think he even sounded that strained. He had a tight smile on his face because that was what happened when he got nervous.

"Okay." She was just looking at him. "Me too."

"Oh, you – " he hadn't *thought* she'd gotten back with Jonathan but he didn't know – "so you – I don't – what, do you, you want to get back together or something?"

"No!" Nancy said right away which was so lovely. "I mean – no. Steve, I don't know. I just – wanted to come over and see you. You've been so great to me lately, and – no, I mean, you *are* great," she went

on; Steve didn't know. "And I just, um. I feel like I never really appreciated that about you."

"Oh," Steve said. "So, what you – feel bad or something?" *Finally* she felt bad. It was too great.

"No! That's ... not what I mean."

"Okay," he said. "So you ... " The wheels were spinning away in his head. They were kind of rusty but they were working. "Nancy Wheeler," he said slowly. "Did you come over here for a booty call?"

Nancy laughed again; he was so hilarious. "*No!*" she said again. "I mean – no. I don't know. Is that – would that be really bad?"

Steve thought about it; he only had to think about it for a minute. Maybe he was being stupid again. Pretty ex-girlfriend shows up at your house, says she wants to hook up. What was he supposed to do? He'd have killed for this six months ago. "No, it's not bad," he said.

"Okay, so ... ?" She was looking at him like she expected him to say something or to know what to do. "Um, do you ... ?"

"You wanna go inside?"

"Sure." That had seemed to be the right thing to say; she had her bright smile on.

Steve gave her a hand up. They walked up the stairs to the house. He felt glad he'd put the dogs outside; Nancy never really said it but he knew she didn't like animals too much.

In the hallway the house was dark and quiet. Nancy headed straight for the living room as if she'd been to his house more than once in the last year and a half. Steve looked after her for a moment, bemused, then he followed.

Nancy sat on the couch while Steve went over to draw the blinds on the bay window. There was no reason to draw the blinds except he figured Nancy would want him to if they were gonna – well. He didn't know what they were gonna.

He went and sat down next to her; he felt nervous and not like the cool dumb jock she wanted him to be. He wasn't in school so he wasn't a jock anymore anyway. "Um, do you wanna talk?" he asked her.

Nancy made a little face. "Do you really want to?" she asked him.

"Oh. Okay." He just sat looking at her.

She was still making a face like he was being funny. "Steve, it doesn't have to be a big thing."

"Right. Sure," he said. He felt stupid; he always wanted more than she wanted to give him. He always wanted more than anyone wanted to give him he guessed. "Okay. Not a thing. Whatever you want."

"Okay." She was looking at him and smiling softly; she did look so pretty. She looked so pretty and she'd said he was great and she'd came over here so she did want him a little. He did want her; it was Nancy and he wanted her and he wanted her to make him feel better. He thought he was allowed to have that.

He leaned over and kissed her. He'd felt like utter crap all weekend; he could have one thing.

Nancy kissed him back and it was nice; it was okay. It was just what he remembered when he'd think about kissing Nancy, being with her. She was so soft and small. He'd always thought she was the prettiest girl in school.

Nancy kissed him back and everything started happening kind of fast. She got his shirt untucked from his pants and he took her sweater off her. She put both her hands in his hair; her nails felt good scraping against his scalp. He couldn't really believe it. He sank down against the couch with her; she shivered a little.

"Too cold?"

"No," she told him. "I'm great," she said so he kissed her again. She opened her mouth a little and he felt her tongue sweep against his. Her curly hair was soft against the side of his face.

From outside there was the squeal of tires on the street, like someone was peeling off of Fairview or onto it. Out towards the back of the house the dogs started going crazy barking and it was so stupid but Steve thought, *Billy*. It was so stupid because it'd been five days and there was no way in hell Billy was going to come over here and try to talk to him or apologize; he had too much pride for that. It was too crazy but still, it just felt like –

“Steve?” Nancy was looking at him; he'd sat up a little without realizing it. God she looked so good spread out on the couch. She looked like everything he'd thought he'd want for so long. It was just – “What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” He shifted over on the couch. Didn't know what to say. “I, uh. I left the mail outside.”

Nancy smiled at him; she thought he was being funny again. “I think it'll be okay,” she said.

“Right. Sure. Sorry.”

He was being totally stupid. Nancy was right here and he didn't need to be thinking about Billy. He knew Billy wasn't thinking about him. He leaned back down; Nancy ran her hands up his back and in his hair. She shifted underneath him and reached up to meet his mouth; she still knew just how to kiss him. Her eyes were so blue.

It was too stupid and he didn't mean to think about Billy but now he was thinking about Billy. He tried to stop. He tried to think about Nancy; she was right here.

It felt so wrong though. He didn't understand it. It wasn't that he didn't want her, couldn't want her. It wasn't like she was any less beautiful.

It just felt so wrong. She felt so fragile underneath him, this tiny trembling thing. He'd always like that about her, how little she was, delicate. Now it just felt like he was – overpowering her or something.

Her fingers were too gentle in his hair; her hands were too soft. He

kissed her throat and her collarbones and worked his way back up to her mouth. That felt wrong too. Her mouth was too small and she didn't bite his lip and grin against him. It felt weird, it was too wrong. She ran her hands over him; he was half-hard so she started undoing his belt.

Oh god. Okay. He let her undo his belt and kept kissing her.

It wasn't exactly like he didn't want to – he was nineteen years old, of course he wanted to – but there was this thing in the back of his head ticking away, telling him how wrong he was being. He felt like he was going to throw up in about a minute.

He knew he wasn't cheating on Billy but he felt like he was cheating on Billy. He still wanted him; he'd thought all last night about how he'd wanted him. How could he do this with her if he still wanted him. Bill didn't look a thing like Nancy and she was right in front of him but it was like all that Steve could see, Billy all around them like a ghost. Or really more like a demonic presence because it was Billy. But he was what Steve wanted.

He felt so horrible. He couldn't do it – he couldn't do it to Billy and he couldn't do it to Nancy. He couldn't just use her because he felt like crap right now. He was being a total piece of shit again.

Steve sat up and pulled away from her. "I – God, I'm sorry, we really can't do this."

Nancy was just laid out on the couch in her cute little blue dress that matched her eyes; they got real wide. She sat up too and looked unsure of herself. "I – okay," she said in a stilted voice. She wrapped her arms around herself so he gave her her sweater back. "Did I ... do something wrong?"

God he was awful. He felt so awful; he couldn't answer her. He could still taste her on his mouth.

"Steve?"

"No, you didn't do anyth – it's not that," he said finally. "I, I lied to you before. I am seeing someone. I mean, I was."

Nancy's mouth formed a perfect 'o' for a second and then she pressed her lips together. She looked so embarrassed and Steve felt awful. "Oh," she managed. "I didn't ... I'm sorry, I haven't – seen you with anyone." She said slowly, "I didn't think you had a girlfriend. I'm sorry."

"No, Nance, it's not." He felt so small and horrible, sitting there with her. He didn't know if he could tell her; he should tell her. Part of him wanted to tell her. He didn't know how to say it. "It's not. It's not a girl."

Nancy just stared at him; her face went perfectly blank. "You ... oh," she said. Her eyes got huge. "*OH!*" she said. "Oh, my god! O-okay. Okay. Uh, I just – "

"Oh, my god, please don't freak out – "

"I'm not freaked out!" Nancy said, freaked out. "I just – um, okay. I didn't know that. About you. That you. Liked. Okay."

"It's not, I still like girls," Steve told her. He didn't know why it felt so important that he tell her. "I mean – you and me, that, it still meant everything to me, I still, I'm still – "

"No, that, it's fine," Nancy said. She still looked really overwhelmed but she smiled at him. Well she tried to. "I'm just surprised. I'm not – "

"I don't want you to, like, be upset at me."

"Steve! I'm not upset!" she cried. He didn't answer her so she hit his arm. "I'm *not!*" she said.

"Okay," Steve said. "I'm sorry."

Nancy didn't respond for a few seconds; she swung her legs over on the couch and sat up so that she was sitting beside him now. They just sat there for a while, both hunched over.

Nance was chewing on her bottom lip; she looked thoughtful. "So ... who is it?"

"It doesn't matter, we broke up."

"Oh." Her little eyebrows drew down. "Steve, I'm sorry. When?"

"Uh. Last week."

"Oh!" The eyebrows went up again. "Oh, so this is, a new – "

"Yeah, yep. I, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done this with you – "

"No, I – " they were both stammering – "that's my fault too, I shouldn't have – " she frowned and made a face. "No, this was me. I was being selfish. I'm sorry."

"That's okay," Steve said. He felt so stupid.

Nancy made another face, curious. She leaned over a little and looked at him until he looked back at her. "So ... do I know him?"

"You, what, no," Steve said in a desperate panic. "You – why would you – know him?"

Her eyes were getting bigger and bigger looking at him; she put one of her fingers against the side of her mouth. "Oh, my god," she said softly. "I'm so *stupid*. It's – it's Billy, isn't it? Billy Hargrove?"

Steve stared at her. And stared at her and stared at her. "I – ha," he said; he tried to make a dismissive face. "Why would it be – "

"Oh, my god, shut up!" Nancy said; she was kind of gasping. She looked super overwhelmed again. "You guys – are always together, are you kidding me? And the – the way he *looks* at you? Steve!"

"What, what?" he said; he didn't know what she was talking about. What way did Billy look at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Steve. I'm serious."

"I, he, it doesn't matter," Steve told her. "It's not, he doesn't wanna be with me like that. Anymore."

Her eyes looked so soft and sad for him. She just looked like Nancy, the same Nancy he'd known for years. "What happened?"

"I don't know. It's my fault. One of – kids found out about us, it was real ugly. He didn't want anybody to know." Felt so horrible again; he definitely wasn't going to tell her about the stuff Billy had said to Lucas. He kind of felt ashamed or something. She didn't need to know.

"Oh, god." She looked really sad. "I'm sorry, that's – he doesn't really seem like .. the easiest person to get along with."

"Yeah, definitely not."

"I'm sorry," she said again. "So do you – I mean, are you okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine."

"Have you guys – talked or anything?"

"Nope," Steve said. "I – yeah, I'm, I'm fine, I really don't – feel like talking about this with –"

"Okay! Okay! No problem! I'm done, I swear!" She held up her hands; she bit her lip. Her eyes were sparkling. "Okay, but I – one question?"

Steve was so tired. "Oh, my god, what?"

"Okay, Janice Thompson says he has a tattoo on his butt, is that true?"

Jesus H. "He never hooked up with Janice Thompson, she doesn't know what she's talking about," Steve grumbled; he felt really grouchy in about a minute.

"So – no tattoos?"

"No, he doesn't have any frickin' tattoos!"

Nancy looked downright mirthful. "But you *have* seen his butt, is what you're telling me."

“OH, MY GOD, NANCY!” Steve said; Nancy laughed and laughed. Steve had no idea why he’d even let her in the house. Truly she was the real worst. “You are so freaking terrible, I swear to god I’m not telling you about this – “

Nancy laughed some more; she even clapped a little like a terrible person. “All right, okay, okay! Okay, no more, I swear. I’m sorry. Okay, but is it – “

“No, nope, I swear, I’m not doing this with you – “

“I’m being supportive!” Nancy cried. “Does anyone else know?”

“I – yeah, I haven’t really talked to anyone, I don’t know who Lucas told – “

“Oh.” She made a face. “He’s the one who found out?”

“Yeah. Yeah.”

“Okay,” she said in a small voice; she was frowning. Maybe she did know a little about Billy; maybe Mike had told her or something. That he was. That he didn’t really like Lucas. “Okay, that’s not great.”

“No, it was really bad, actually.” He didn’t want to talk about it any more but she was still looking at him. “He – said all this horrible crap to me, he doesn’t wanna be with me anymore. We haven’t, haven’t talked since.”

“I’m sorry, Steve,” she was still frowning. “You still like him.”

God it was weird to hear her saying it. “Yeah, I do.”

“Okay, so if you guys just talked or something – “

“No, Nance. He doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“Huh, that’s weird,” Nancy said; she was imitating him. “I feel like I remember telling you not to talk to me.”

Steve laughed a little. It was more of a scoff. “Yeah, that worked out so great for us, didn’t it?”

Nancy frowned and stopped teasing him. "I'm sorry," she said again. "If he's – if that's what you want, I want you to be happy. You *are* important to me. Even if you don't believe me," she said.

"Thanks, Nance," Steve said. It was dumb but he felt all choked up again. "Yeah, but I really – okay, I've been thinking about this all week, I really don't want to think about it anymore."

"Okay. Okay." She sat next to him for a while, small and solemn and serious, classic Nancy. She chewed on her lower lip and crossed her legs. "Do you want me to go home?" she asked finally.

"If you want." Then he could be alone and miserable again he guessed.

"I can go if you want," Nancy said; Steve looked at her. "Or ... I can go with you to the block party."

"Uh. You want to go to the party?"

"No, I wanted to get laid," Nancy told him matter-of-factly; Steve wondered when she'd gotten so blunt. "But, since you kind of have a BOYFRIEND and all, we could ... go to the block party instead. As friends," she added.

Steve guessed he could go to the party. "He's not my boyfriend," he told her.

Nancy ignored him; she was doing her sweater up. She opened up the curtains on the bay window. It had begun to rain and big heavy drops cascaded against the pane in crazy patterns. "Get ready to see my hair do amazing things!" she said. "So ... do you think that you can still beat me at beer pong?"

"I don't think that, I know that."

"Okay!" Nancy said. Her smile was really sweet and she was laughing again. "Okay! Okay, you're confident. That's really interesting. We'll see."

2. Chapter Two

Summary for the Chapter:

Max whipped her head around. She was turning all red; it was honestly terrifying. "LUCAS! If you and I got into a stupid fight, and *you* kissed Melanie Van ZANDT – "

"Wow, you really want to bring up Melanie right now?" Lucas asked her.

Max ignored him. "If you kissed MELANIE VAN ZANDT, would you say that's – mm, HUH, INFIDELITY?"

Steve scoffed. "You're so frickin' retarded, that's not even the same thing – "

"YOU CHEATED ON MY BROTHER, YOU JERK! HE'S GONNA *MURDER* YOU!"

"I DIDN'T CHEAT ON – "

"GUYS!" Lucas cried. "MAYBE NOT A GOOD IDEA TO TALK ABOUT THIS IN THE MIDDLE OF MAIN STREET?"

Chapter Two

The block party was being thrown by the Howards who lived three houses down. They were nice and had no kids. Steve'd known them since he was about ten; even until last year he'd cut their grass about twice a month during the summer.

There were a lot of people around and a lot of people to talk to so he told Nancy not to feel stuck with him. She rolled her eyes like he had said something smart. "I don't want you to embarrass yourself," she said. She was so kind.

“Huh. Do you really think you can stop that?” Steve asked her. She smiled at him so he got her a drink.

She looked so pretty still, even getting rained on. There was a part of him that almost couldn't believe he hadn't hooked up with her. There was something totally wrong with him (it was called 'Billy Hargrove Disease.' It was usually lethal – nine out of ten mortality rate).

They ended up not playing beer pong until much later, not that Nancy could beat him at it anyway. Kyle Breckner and Alex Kiersnowski were home for the summer and Steve hadn't even thought to call them yet. He'd been friends with them since freshman year and they were okay guys. They'd done basketball with him and they were about the only two of his friends that hadn't totally ditched him after his big fight with Tommy at the start of junior year so really they were more than okay. Then he'd lost even more of his friends hanging around Nancy all the time because that was he did when he liked someone. He guessed he'd even done that shit with Bill, even before they'd gotten together. He always told himself not to do the obsessive thing but then he just went and did the obsessive thing.

Anyway Nancy thought they were okay too. She always had, not that it mattered what she thought anymore. Or should have mattered. They played for a while and she and Steve beat them a couple times. Nancy had pretty good aim with a gun so she had pretty good aim with a ping pong ball too.

It was raining pretty hard on and off so it wasn't that great of a day for a party. The weather looked about the same as he felt inside which was dumb because he was having an all right time, really. There were a lot of big tents set up but everyone was soaked through by past four. 'Dancing in the Dark' came blaring on over the speakers and Steve told Nancy, “You know you still have my Springsteen record.”

“What? You're so crazy. No I, I don't,” she lied and wandered away from him.

Nancy got pretty drunk even though she said she wasn't drunk. She was still the only chick Steve knew who could get drunk off of three

beers, probably because she only weighed about a hundred pounds. Nancy said he exaggerated and she was up to one-twelve now.

She contemplated her drunk existence into the punch bowl and Kyle told Steve they should meet up sometime next week. He wanted to start a team for summer street hockey – they had to play on Saturdays since he had a fulltime job too until the end of August. Steve said that sounded good even though he sucked at street hockey.

Kyle said, “Yeah, I didn’t say you’d be on my team, man.” Nancy laughed into the punch bowl. She asked if anyone wanted any food and wandered away again.

“Hey, did you guys get back together or something?” Alex asked him.

“Uh, nope,” Steve said vaguely. “Nah. We’re just hanging out.”

Alex and Kyle were both at Indiana State waiting for him to join them. They’d lived on-campus though so they hadn’t been around. It was funny. They’d been off discovering themselves at college; Steve had been right here in Hawkins discovering himself.

He definitely wasn’t going to tell them about it though. He was pretty stupid like Bill had said but he wasn’t that stupid. Everyone didn’t need to know about it. It would just be nice if maybe one person knew. Two now, because of his huge mouth. Crap, well – no, three people. Maybe four. This was probably what Bill had been afraid of.

Alex was still staring at him; Steve realized he was probably making a face. “Yeah, I haven’t, you know, really been seeing anyone,” Steve lied. Not lied. Apparently. News flash.

“I don’t blame you, man. Same girls in this town.”

“Yeah. Yeah, same girls,” Steve said like a moron. Alex started telling him about how great life was in the big city like it wasn’t only an hour away. Nancy came back over and spilled another drink on herself. She didn’t scream at him that he was bullshit this time though so really the day was a success so far.

He drove Nance home a little before seven. She was still tipsy and he didn't want her to get in trouble. She looked guilty when Bruce Springsteen came on the radio again; she totally still had his record.

Steve was surprised she'd let him take her home, really. She always acted so independent, like a certain other annoying person he knew. She was going to come back tomorrow and get her mom's car. She said she'd probably get in trouble for leaving it across town but she'd get in more trouble if she drove into a stop sign or something.

They sat in the car on the street in front of her house and watched Mike and Mr. Wheeler arguing out on the front lawn. Mike got on his crappy bike and drove past them making a face. Steve and Nancy waved at him so he flipped them off ("MICHAEL!" said Mr. Wheeler). He warmed Steve's heart.

Nance threw her seatbelt off. They watched Mr. Wheeler mutter to himself and drag the garden hose across the front lawn.

Nancy turned back to him. They just looked at each other for a few seconds, awkward again. Her hair was really big and Steve was pretty sure he had a dopey smile on his face.

"So, um, thanks for the ride," Nancy said.

"Yeah, sure."

"Ummm," she said again. She tugged the corner of her bottom lip against her teeth for a moment. "Hey, so ... let me know if you work things out with – " she lowered her voice like they were in a movie and leaned over – "Billy, okay?"

"Yeah, you really don't have to do that," Steve told her right away. He really didn't feel like talking to her about Bill; no matter what he knew she didn't like him too much anyway. He'd heard it from her practically all year. *I don't understand you. Why do you want to hang around with someone like that? He's just like Tommy, Steve!* When had that been, back in October or November? He wasn't like Tommy. Anyway all that'd done was make him hang around Bill even more. Really he could thank Nancy for all this.

"No, I mean it!" Nance said. "I wanna ... know. I want to be – your friend, Steve, I mean it this time."

"You just want the, uh, the gay details or whatever."

"Okay, not going to lie, I do want the gay details," Nancy said earnestly. Steve laughed. "God, that's really weird to say." She made one of her cute faces. "Sorry. This is very new for me."

"Uh, yeah, me too." He hoped she didn't think he'd been dreaming about guys all the time when they'd been together or something. Okay Michael Hutchence *once* but that'd been totally weird and he didn't even remember it really. The 'What You Need' music video had been crazy.

"When did that – even *happen*?"

"I don't know," Steve said; he knew.

"Okay, you don't want to talk about it, that's fine," Nancy said; Steve wondered if she'd totally lose her shit if she knew that Bill had once blown him in her downstairs bathroom. That kinda felt like a dream too like the 'What You Need' video.

"No, I just – uh, I don't really have anything to tell anymore." He looked out the windshield at the rain and the street. It felt like he was still outside and he could feel it hitting him. "He was being an asshole, I hit him really hard. He doesn't want to talk to me."

"Oh, that's not, like, you guys' thing?" She was trying to be funny.

"Not really," Steve said shortly.

It really wasn't. He looked down at his knuckles gripping the steering wheel. His hand almost wasn't bruised anymore.

Nancy just watched him for a while. "Sorry," was all she said.

"Yeah. My fault."

"But I just – wait, okay, am I totally stupid? Does *Mike* know?"

"No way, I hope not," Steve said. "Just – yeah, just Lucas, because he ... "

"Yeah," Nancy said too.

"Maybe Max too, I don't know." Billy'd said before that Max knew that he had a thing for Steve; Steve'd been sure that she knew Steve had a thing for *him*. "She's gotta know now."

"Okay, I am going to befriend her," Nancy said seriously. She had him laughing again even though he didn't feel like laughing.

"Good luck with that."

He liked Max a lot but she was the same as Billy too; she didn't trust anyone as far as she could throw them. She was a little bit of a girl so she couldn't throw too far. She had a mean right hook though; Billy'd laughed and said he'd taught her everything he knew. Okay Steve needed to stop.

"This is making sense, I'm working things out," Nancy said. "I thought she just had an attitude problem."

"Yeah. Definitely does, they both do."

Mr. Wheeler sprayed the car with the hose.

"OKAY, DAD, GOD!" Nancy said. She rolled the window down so he'd stop spraying; he almost didn't. "Oh, my GOD. All right!" She turned back to Steve. "I *really* have to go, do you have my mom's keys?"

"Sure." He dug around in his pockets.

"If you don't hear from me, Mom's pot roast finally killed me," Nancy said. "Call me this week, okay?"

"Yeah, all right."

"I'm serious."

"Okay, I know."

She opened her door up and gave him an awkward half-hug; Mr. Wheeler sprayed the sidewalk next to the car. “*God*,” Nance huffed into his ear; she smelled like a Corona. “You should go back to the party, you didn’t even drink.”

New Year new Steve. Sad bisexual Steve, no stupid tie today though. Kyle and Alex were still around; he should probably go drink with them. He kind of just wanted to go home and feel bummed out, though. It was going to be Saturday night and if it was a usual Saturday he’d have Bill over laughing his head off watching *Tales from the Darkside* and explaining the symbolism to Steve when he didn’t understand it.

For some reason that made him feel really small really fast. It was that same awful spin-y feeling he’d had on the couch, like a bad dream, Nance laid out underneath him. He wondered what the symbolism meant when you punched your boyfriend who didn’t think he was your boyfriend in the face and then made out with your ex-girlfriend.

Nancy was just looking at him. Her makeup was a little smudged from the rain and her eyes looked so big. Bill had big eyes too, so blue. Okay Steve was doing the thing again.

“Yeah, maybe I will,” he said.

Sunday sucked because he was hungover; he had gone back out drinking with the guys. Mom came home early before noon and laid into him for being hungover even though she’d been feeding him drinks all last week like an irresponsible parent. She didn’t like it too much when he pointed that out; she’d crossed her arms and all.

After she finished bitching him out she made him take her out to lunch. “Do you want to *just get a pizza?*” she asked; she was being cute with him but Steve didn’t really feel like being cute back.

“Whatever, if you want.”

They ate Thai food because Mom was on one of her kicks and then

she dragged him around to a bunch of stores because she said she wanted to redo the living room in the fall. She said everything looked dingy from the dogs being in the house all the time laying on everything. She always said that even though everything just looked the same.

Even though he missed his mom and wanted to spend time with her he still instantly felt like an impatient little kid in the store, especially with her going on about Luke and Leia and how she was possibly developing a dander allergy after seven years. She was so hilarious. She liked them and even let them in the house when he wasn't home so he didn't know why she had to go on about them.

She made him hold her purse in the store while she looked at curtains; Dad would make fun of him and call him a girly-man. He did kind of feel like a girly-man trailing after her and holdin' her bags. In high school he'd never be caught dead out anywhere with her.

He remembered Bill saying before *You should hang out with your mom if you want*; Steve'd thought he'd laugh at him. Every time lately that he'd get annoyed at his mom and want to complain he'd remember that Bill's mom was dead and then he'd feel like a piece of crap for wanting to complain, even if Bill wasn't around. So he didn't complain now even when his mom smushed his face and called him 'my baby' in front of the cute checkout girl.

Back at the house it still felt empty even though Mom was there. She had two new pieces from her job that she had to edit; she had her stuff to do. She didn't ask him about Billy again and she didn't ask about Nancy either, though she had made a comment about Mrs. Wheeler's car being parked out on the street when she'd come home. Steve certainly wasn't going to mention either of them.

His mom could be so ... disinterested in him sometimes; it was just the way she was. She could shut down in a minute if you said something stupid or something she didn't like. It wasn't that bad or anything. It was mostly him. You'd think he'd be glad to have a mom who didn't need to know where he was all the time. A couple of times when Nancy had been over she'd said that his mom was 'cold.' She definitely wasn't but Steve guessed he could see how someone

would think that if his mom didn't like 'em.

Steve's mom didn't really like Nancy; she never had. He didn't know why. It was more than just the fighting monsters thing that she didn't know about.

She hadn't liked any of his girlfriends that much really, not that he'd been too serious with anyone else before. Maybe that was why. She always said he needed to be serious about something. She never liked Tommy either and she hadn't really liked Carol anymore after Tommy and Carol had got together; Steve never should have told her that he had a crush on Carol in sixth grade. That'd worked out so well for him. It wasn't Tommy's fault or Carol's fault that she'd liked Tommy more. Anyway it was her loss because grade seven was a great year for him; he'd gotten like five inches taller that year.

Aside from Tommy his mom had never really had a problem with any of his other friends. She liked Dustin now even though he was just a kid; she thought he was precocious. She'd seen Will before and said he was precious (different from precocious, Steven – he *knew* that). She liked Max and Billy, she said they were both smart in different ways. Max cracked Steve's mom up too.

Steve wasn't that smart. His reading skills had peaked when he'd been like eleven; even now when he'd read some stuff it was like the sentences would get all screwed up in his head. His mom had wanted him to get some weird test done but Dad said he was just lazy. He knew his mom wanted him to be good at something.

He thought maybe she'd always wanted a girl or something. She said boys were too rough and she'd always complained about him and Tommy fighting too much. Once she'd beat him and Tommy around the whole house because she'd heard them calling some girl a dog; that was a shitty thing to have said. Steve had always wanted more attention from her and he remembered once as a kid she'd told him that he made her tired. He was too much he guessed. He'd even done swim club for her for all of high school but she'd said he should do what he liked so he'd done basketball too. He never knew what he wanted.

He puttered around the house feeling like a loser and tried not to

make too much noise so he wouldn't bug his mom. He let Luke and Leia out for the night and watched them chase each other around the yard to their huge doghouse back by the trees (a real eyesore, Dad said, even though he was the one who'd bought it).

He cleaned up his mess from the weekend and looked through his mail. His Indiana State application was missing; he wondered if Billy'd really hawked it or something. He guessed he wasn't getting that back anytime soon. Probably have to send for a new one. Dumb.

Out in the living room he watched *Unsolved Mysteries* all by himself. He watched the ten o'clock news, checked all the doors to make sure everything was locked up. He looked out at the empty street. He went to bed feeling sad and annoyed. His stomach hurt from eating too much weird Thai food. It took him a long time to fall asleep.

Monday he slept too late and didn't even wake up until his mom knocked on his door and asked if he was still going to work, then he had to rush to get ready. Day three of good Steve hair even if he otherwise felt and looked like crap.

It was busy at work like it usually was on Mondays so it went by pretty quick. A customer made Joanne cry on the phone so Steve took over for her. No, he didn't know why everything was shipping out so late, he'd see what he could do. Steve was good on the phones even though his dad said it wasn't for him. It was better than doing paperwork but he didn't really care enough to fight it or whatever. Later Joanna was still crying; Linda told him before she cried about three times a week. She had that nervous disorder and she still lived with her parents. Steve got her the coffee she liked so she hugged him in her cubicle (still crying). "I had a really bad weekend," she told him.

Steve patted her back awkwardly; he was pretty sure you weren't supposed to touch girls in the workplace. "Yeah, I hear you."

She sat back at her desk and fixed her face. "Do I look okay?" she asked him.

"Absolutely," he told her; she gave him a really nice smile. He went on back to the back office before she could hug him again. Todd was the only other guy there today and he gave Steve a thumbs up for gettin' a hug from Joanne. Joanne was a redhead and she was the prettiest girl in the office even if she was kind of a basket case; Steve could see how some people were into that. Anyway she was way too old for him.

They only took a half hour for lunch and he didn't really have to fend off Linda with her stupid eighty questions about his love life. He didn't have anything new to tell her anyway; she looked all disappointed.

Dustin called for him at one but Steve waited a couple minutes to go up front because Dustin always talked Linda's ear off for eight minutes anyway. But then he worried that maybe Dustin was having a gay freakout so he went up after four minutes.

Linda looked disappointed some more and handed the phone over to him. Steve gave her a suspicious look. "Don't flirt with Joanne, Steven," she told him like she was his actual mom.

"WHO'S JOANNE? Is she HOT?" Dustin asked in his ear.

"She's like thirty, man," Steve told him; Dustin said that didn't matter.

He asked Steve if he wanted to hang out later. He said that Mike wasn't in school but Will had talked to him and they all needed to meet up. Steve said okay even though he didn't really feel like dealing with more Monster Squad bullshit especially on a Monday. Dustin told him not to eat anything because they were going to convalesce at Mike's the pizza joint on Main Street. He really said convalesce.

"Yeah, okay, are you sure they meant the pizza pla – " Steve said; Dustin hung up on him happily.

It was nearly six when he finally got out of work so he just went straight to Dustin's after. Dust tromped down his front porch and ran over to Steve's car with his familiar eager smile on his face so Steve guessed he really still hadn't heard anything from Lucas. He still didn't get it but he wasn't going to question it.

Okay he was going to question it a little. He wanted to get a chance to talk to Lucas, see if the kid was okay. He should have done that last week but he'd been too busy being a fricking primadonna over everything.

Dustin had a huge bag of beef jerky with him; Steve glanced over and watched him stuff his face as they drove down 541 closer into the town. "Hey, man, why are you eating that whole thing? We're literally going to get food right now."

Dustin thrust a jerky strip in his face. "Do you want one?"

"Je-sus. No thanks." Steve batted the jerky away. That stuff was so gross. "What, ah, what happened to your diet? You lost fifteen pounds, I thought we were going for twenty."

"Finals are in TWO AND A HALF WEEKS, I'm stress-eating!"

Dustin was giving him a look that said he was being a major Den Dad at the moment; Steve didn't appreciate it. That was something Billy called him because he thought he was fucking hilarious and he'd gotten all the snotty little brats aboard the Make Fun of Steve train. Okay they'd already been on it. It was a train that ran all the frickin' time apparently.

Steve hadn't really understood what it meant until Dustin had explained it to him before. *Den dad, you know, like a den mother? Like in Girl Scouts?* Steve was so offended. He'd asked why he couldn't just be a cub scout leader; Dustin pointed out El and Max too so it couldn't be cub scouts. *It's equality!* he'd said.

Whatever. He knew Billy called him Mr. Mom too; he'd heard him on

the phone with Max one time after Bill had gotten into some shit with his dad. He was always getting into some shit with his dad because his dad was crazy. Well Bill was crazy too but Steve knew why. *Mr. Mom's patching me up, just hang out at the Byers' til late.*

Whatever, again. Had Bill ever even seen that movie? Someone had to care about Billy and someone had to care about Max aside from Billy and Lucas. Someone had to care about what stupid shit the stupid brats were getting into all the time since nobody's parents knew about all the monsters aside from Joyce. She'd had to sign a lot of paperwork too, just like everyone else had. The government had paperwork on everyone's family; they even knew that Steve had a little cousin out in Pennsylvania that he'd never even met before. Maisy, she was four now. They'd reminded him about Maisy who had been two then when he'd been signing all the confidentiality paperwork.

The kids didn't care about the paperwork though. Dustin said it didn't matter now since Nancy and Jonathan had gotten the lab shut down for good. Apparently.

Steve was tired of caring about stuff that didn't matter. "Okay, okay," he said over Dustin going on and on.

Dustin lapsed into silence and ate his jerky for a few minutes. He looked over at Steve and started grinning. "Hey, your shirt makes you look like a peppermint," he said. He thought about it. "Or the ice cream man."

Steve looked down at himself. He'd gotten dressed kind of fast this morning; he was wearing his worst tie and a short-sleeved Oxford shirt that was white and had tiny red vertical lines on it. Probably not his best look, not that it mattered right now. The frickin' ice cream man. Jesus H. "Yeah, great, thanks."

Dustin gave him a thumbs up. "Did your mom buy you that one?"

"You're such a dipshit," Steve told him. He lied, "No she didn't frickin' buy it for me."

"Okay, buddy," Dustin said like a little shithead; Steve ignored him.

Fleetwood Mac came on the radio playing ‘Rhiannon.’ That always made him think about Bill, well not the song itself because it was about a girl but just Fleetwood Mac in general. Bill liked Fleetwood Mac; Steve’d had to hear *Rumors* in Bill’s little bedroom like five times.

Last month Billy had been really sick and he’d stayed at Steve’s house for two nights and Steve’d heard him singing ‘Rhiannon’ all looped up in the shower like a total dork. He’d sounded pretty terrible. Anyway if Stevie Nicks could sing a song about a girl then Steve could listen to it and think about a guy he guessed.

Actually he didn’t really want to think about Billy at all – that should be like his goal for the week. Actually Fleetwood Mac wasn’t even good; they were totally old anyway and were a total, like, mom band or whatever. Actually they were like the worst band ever; who liked Fleetwood Mac? Bill listened to the worst music. *He* was Mr. Mom!

Steve smacked the radio so hard that it turned off; Dustin stared at him with a piece of jerky dangling out of his mouth like a dog.

“Don’t like that song?”

“The, the frickin’ radio’s too loud,” Steve snapped like a moron.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah I’m GREAT.” Dust stared at him and chewed his jerky.

Mike’s the pizza place didn’t have its own parking lot so Steve pulled off the street two blocks down and they headed in. It was crowded for a Monday but they got their usual booth towards the back.

No one else was there yet; Steve and Dustin got drinks and went to wait for the rest of the little assholes. They called themselves The Party which was so lame. Steve thought the Monster Squad was more apt. Billy called them the creepy kids and the baby brat pack because he was so hilarious. Okay Steve was doing the thing again, again.

Dustin slurped his soda and started going on about finals; he was a freshman this year and he was already worried about taking the PSAT next spring. Steve could remember back to when Dust’d been a

snot-nosed seventh grader walking in on him and Nancy in the Wheelers' basement all the time. Time moved so fast and stuff changed so fast. It could change in a minute; you couldn't stop it.

The diner door jingled again and when Steve finally looked up Max and Lucas were walking in together. They were both sweaty from the summer heat, heads turned down towards each other.

Max was wearing a baggy Led Zeppelin t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, probably one of Billy's. Lucas had his jean jacket on and a headband too because he was an insane person. They were talking quietly together and Lucas was holding her skateboard for her under one arm. They looked like an edgy little couple in a magazine ad that Nance'd like.

Max looked up too as they walked on over to the table. She got a little frown on her face when she saw Steve. Her bare shoulders were thin and red and so was her face, blushed from the sun. She collapsed into the booth across from him and shifted over to make room for Lucas, who sat beside her with a cautious look on his face.

They both stared at Steve in terse silence. It was already going so great.

Dustin pushed his soda over to Max, totally oblivious. "Jeez, did you guys walk here?"

Max ignored the soda. She was still frowning at Steve. "Where's my brother?" she asked him.

Steve blinked at her. "I – I don't know."

Max's frown deepened and she just looked at him for a few seconds. Steve couldn't read her gaze, blue-eyed and too-bright, not that he was good at that stuff anyway. "He's not with you?"

"You – why would he be with me?"

She had to know everything now. Most of it, anyway. He didn't know why she'd think that Billy would be with him – she had to know about what Bill'd said to Lucas. Maybe that Steve'd hit him, too.

"I dunno." She was just looking at him. She mopped her face off and pressed a hand against the side of her blotchy neck. "He wasn't – in school today, I thought he was with you."

"Yeah, I'm not really – "

Lucas was making a face and taking Dustin's soda. "Man, I knew that asshole wasn't really going to give me a ride anywhere."

"He would have if he said!" Max snapped at him.

Steve stared blankly. "The hell would he give you a ride for?" Lucas ignored him.

"Something's wrong, he wasn't home all weekend," Max said too which answered no questions.

She took the soda out of Lucas's hand. Dustin swiped for it and Max leaned back in the booth. "Jesus Christ, I didn't say drink it *all* – " he recoiled at her snarl. "Hey, hey, don't get upset!"

Dustin had this soothing voice he put on that was really annoying. "Billy's probably just loaded out of his mind in someone's bushes or something like he always is."

Sounds about right. Steve didn't say anything. He was not going to make a comment. This was the start of Don't Think About Billy Week after all, probably the first of many. He looked down at the paper menu on the table.

Max had her little frown back on. It made her look about twelve years old instead of fifteen. "No, he's not – his ... dad came back home yesterday, Billy said he wasn't going to ... " She chewed on her lip and then thought better of it. "He always comes home on Sunday," she said in a small voice.

She looked tired, too, Steve noticed for the first time. Big circles under her big eyes. Max kinda reminded him of a porcelain doll or something sometimes, well when she wasn't all blotchy, not that he'd ever be creepy enough to say it. He wondered what kinda night she'd had by herself waiting for Bill to come home.

He felt bad and he also didn't know what to say. He wondered if their fight and all the shit with Lucas was going to ring in another era of Billy treating Max like shit, too.

He hadn't thought Bill would do that to her. They cared about each other – Billy'd even as much as said it before. Billy barely ever said stuff that was real and that wasn't just something he thought was funny or some cocky bullshit so Steve remembered it when he did. He kinda like stored up it inside himself just like he did with the cocky (ha-ha) parts. He remembered a lot.

Max's okay though. Used to think I was real cool before I fucked all the shit up. He'd said just last week *I can't – I can't come over later. Gotta keep her away from my dad, man.* He'd said, too, *I dunno what to do.* He hadn't said what it was exactly that he didn't know what to do about but Steve could guess. So why would he –

He leaned on the table and rested his chin in his hands. "I'm sorry, Max, I don't know where he is."

"Are you actually worried or something?" Dustin asked her. He sounded really curious (Steve was too).

"I don't know." She slid Dustin's now-empty soda glass back over to him ("Oh, thanks," Dust said dryly). She wasn't looking at Steve anymore. She was looking at the menu too. "But what did he say when he ... " she stopped when Lucas touched her arm.

He was still staring at Steve in an unreadable way. Steve realized that even now he had no clue what the heck Lucas thought about him or the whole thing – maybe he really thought Steve was some kind of creepy pervert. Life was gonna be super fun now.

Max bit her lip again and then her face changed, closing off. "Nevermind," she huffed. She looked over at Dustin and narrowed her eyes. "So what the hell are we doing?"

"Waiting for Mike and Will, I guess."

"Okay, *well*, when are they getting here?" She looked annoyed, and still sweaty. "I don't *have* all night, I want to see if Billy came home –

”

It was nice to see that Steve wasn't the only one who was hyper-fixated on Bill. Then again he and Max were family so it was probably different. Billy loved to fucking point out that Steve wasn't in on that. Steve'd always wanted a little brother or even a sister; he'd been the only kid on his block until he'd been ten and Tommy had moved in two streets over.

Dustin didn't seem too bothered. “They said seven, should we just order food?”

Max looked glum. “Whatever, I guess,” she said. She must be really glum. She always wanted to eat.

Mike's was just a pizza joint so Steve ordered them a pie. Everyone just picked at it aside from Dust who was still stress-eating apparently. No one really said anything for a while. Lucas was still looking at Steve as if he was Charles Manson or something.

They sat in mostly-awkward silence. Max picked at her pizza listlessly; it was soggy today. Finally she looked up at Dustin with a little glare. “Okay. Where the hell are they?”

“I don't know, they said meet at Mike's at seven!” It was nearing eight by now.

Steve rubbed at his forehead with one hand and then belatedly realized he was probably smearing pizza grease all over his frickin' face. Perfect. He turned to look over at Dustin sitting beside him.

“Hey. Uh, dipshit,” he said slowly.

Dust was eating two slices of pizza stacked atop each other; he said it only counted as one that way. “Ye-eah?”

“So who – exactly said meet at Mike's?”

“Will, why? I didn't talk to Mike yet today.”

“Okay,” Steve said, still slowly. “So, huh, you think – when he said meet at Mike's – he meant his frickin' HOUSE and not the PIZZA

PLACE?”

Dustin stared at him with wide eyes and just chewed his pizza. “Son of a bitch,” he said finally.

“Dude, I frickin’ asked you – “

“*DUSTIN!*” cried Max and Lucas.

“WHAT! NOBODY CLARIFIED, HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW!”

“This is like the fourth time since Christmas, you cum-dumpster!”

“JESUS! MAX!” Steve said. She ignored him.

“God! You just think about food all the time!” Lucas was snapping at Dust.

“UH, NO, I DON’T! I’M ACTUALLY THINKING ABOUT THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE RIGHT NOW!”

“*What?*” said Max.

“Uhhh! I’m actually thinking about the Ottoman Empire!” Lucas mimicked him obnoxiously.

“SORRY THAT I’M IN ADVANCED HISTORY AND YOU HAVE TO SIT AND LISTEN TO MR. MICHAELSON TALK ABOUT TRAINING HIS STUPID FERRETS IN RETARD CLASS – “

“He did that *one* time!” Max yelled all fired up.

“GUYS!” Steve begged them.

“Stop screaming at me, Steve has a migraine!” Dustin said.

“Oh, my god, no I don’t.” He was getting one now.

“So we just WASTED an hour sitting here for no reason?” Lucas yelled. “I have to be home at eight-thirty!”

“Okay, whatever, let’s just go now!”

“No way, my mom’s going to go ballistic if I’m home late again, she already had to drive me to school today!”

“It’s not my fault Max’s stupid brother ditched you – “

“HE’S NOT STUPID, YOU’RE STUPID!” Max totally roared. The girls at the next table over were staring at them.

“Guys, shut the fuck up,” Steve begged them some more. He told Lucas, “Look, I’ll give ya a ride home, if it’s important enough Mike’ll, ah, radio you or whatever – “

“My walkie doesn’t work, Erica put it in the toilet!” Lucas said.

“Oh, my god.” Steve rubbed his face some more. “Okay, he’ll *call you* like a normal person – “

The kids argued over him for a few minutes like usual and Steve lapsed into annoyed silence. Dustin said he’d walk over to his girlfriend Rebecca’s house; her mom could drive them over to Mike’s if it was really important.

“I’ll give you guys a ride home,” Steve told Max and Lucas again.

They just stared at him for a long moment; Steve wanted to feel his head to see if he’d grown horns or something. Finally Lucas said, “Okay. Thanks.”

They said goodbye to Dustin and parted ways. Max walked along beside him and Lucas trailed behind a ways, awkward. It was evening now but it had to be at least eighty degrees still; the setting sun was a bright orange and it hurt Steve’s eyes.

As soon as Dustin was out of earshot Max’s whole demeanor changed. She turned her face up to him and said, “Look, Lucas told me about you and Billy, so you don’t have to *lie* to me anymore.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Lucas piped up from behind them (he didn’t really sound that sorry).

Steve’d figured as much anyway. Even so she managed to make him feel massively guilty in a few seconds just with the way she was

looking at him. “Hey, I’m sorry, that wasn’t me who didn’t want to tell you – ”

“Whatever,” Max interrupted brusquely. “So is Billy really not with you? You can tell the *truth* for once.”

Jeez. “Max, Bill hasn’t talked to me for like a week.”

Max looked up at him and frowned. They’d just crossed the street, and she swerved around a fire hydrant at the corner of Main and Hyland. The breeze fanned her shoulder-length hair out behind her in loose copper coils. She looked totally confused. “No, but – okay, so what happened with you guys on Saturday?”

“Yeah, I – really don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t seen – ”

“Steve! *This* weekend!” Max cried like he was dumb. “I *know* you saw Billy, okay? He went to Lucas’s and then he went to *your* house! What, did you guys just break up for real or something?”

Steve stared blankly. He did a lot of things blankly, he supposed. He threw a glance over his shoulder. “Wait, he went to see Lucas – ? “
And they’re both still alive?

“Yeah, they’re friends again, it’s all great,” Max snapped rapidly. “I’m asking about – “

Lucas was either squinting into the sun or making a great face. “Okay, yeah, that’s a little bit of an overstatement – “

“Whatever, they’re fine, Billy said sorry and he was supposed to drive Lucas to school today. He never showed up though, I thought he was with you.”

Steve stared some more. He’d stopped walking and the kids stood on either side of him.

Nothing really made any sense. Maybe he’d bypassed Hawkins driving home from his aunt’s house and had somehow landed straight in Bizarro-Land, where Nancy Wheeler apparently wanted to sleep with him no-strings-attached and Billy gave out free car rides to

Lucas Sinclair.

Also Steve's hair had looked abnormally good for the last three days; it'd been so humid. So. That was something too.

Anyway. Back to Lucas. It still made no sense. "Okay, wait wait wait." Steve put his hand in his (great) hair for a second. "Why the hell would Billy give you a ride to school?"

Lucas shrugged impassively. "I asked him to."

"You ... asked him to," Steve repeated blankly. "You – what, you asked him to?"

Lucas was giving him the look that said he was Charles Manson again. Very stupid Charles Manson. "Uh, yeah."

"Okay, but – " It was totally nuts. The last time he'd seen Billy and Lucas together, Billy'd been throttling the kid into the bleachers and Lucas had been calling them sick freaks or something. Billy'd called him the n-word. He might still be beating Lucas right *now* if Steve hadn't pulled them apart. "I don't – why would you do that, after what he called ... "

Lucas's eyes got big. He was giving Steve a huge look that said he should shut his mouth so Steve shut his mouth.

Max had her suspicious little frown on again. "*What?*"

"Uh, nothing. I don't know," Steve muttered.

"Yeah, well, we had a really great talk," Lucas said sarcastically. He slid his gaze over to Max for a second and then back to Steve. "It's cool or whatever. He didn't go to your place after?"

"I don't – know?" He'd been with Nancy, and then he hadn't been home. He'd been with – crap. No. There was no way. "No, he never showed up. Maybe he – I dunno, just went to work or something." *Or another party, he seems to like doing that.*

"No, that doesn't make sense!" Max said. "He *said* he was going to go and talk to you!"

She made him feel so weird. She seemed so insistent about it; he didn't understand why. "Okay, yeah, you keep saying that, but he never showed up at my pl – "

"He probably just flaked out or something. Like Dustin said?" Lucas supplied since Max looked so stricken. "Look, I knew he was never gonna actually pick me up – "

"No, if Billy actually said he was going to do something, he would do it!" Max said. She looked imploringly at Steve. "*You know that!*"

"I – guess."

He faltered under her gaze. He guessed she had a point. Bill could be pretty unreliable but he was true to his word if he actually committed to it or whatever. He'd given Steve rides before. Came over when he said he would. Stood up for Max when he said he would. *You told me to call you so I called you.*

He still couldn't wrap his head around Billy and Lucas having a great talk, though, or any kind of talk, really. Even just Billy going over to the kid's house was kinda warping his brain.

"So – where is he?" Max's frown was back on full-force.

"I don't know, I'm sorry." He pushed his hair away from his face. "I really haven't seen him since last week." It had really been a whole week. "I, I don't know where he is, Max."

Max frowned again and shook her head. She and Billy had been hangin' around each other too much; they had the same little upset scowl, curling the corners of their mouths down as if tugged by an unseen ghost hand. Steve felt a weird pang of emotion, sadness or something, looking at her. "No, but that doesn't make any *sense*," she said again. "He feels *really* bad! He was going to go and say sorry to you!"

A little laugh chuffed out of him before he could stop it, this derisive sound. "Uh, yeah, Bill doesn't really do sorry – "

Max's scowl deepened; she looked scary. "Yes he does! He was going to say he loves you!"

“Gross!” gasped Lucas in horror. “Are you *serious*?”

“Oh, my god, shut up, you infant!” Max snapped.

Lucas was making a face. “Sorry, it’s just – it’s *Steve* – “

“I – thanks so much – “

“ – well, *and* Billy – ”

Max shoved at Lucas. “We talked about it! There’s no way he would have – “

Christ on the cross. *He was going to say that he loves you.* Yep, definitely in Bizarro-Land. Billy didn’t love anything aside from maybe his dumb Camaro, and even that was questionable with the way he drove around burning his frickin’ tires out all the time.

Steve’s head felt spin-y; he wondered if you could get sunstroke in two minutes. He’d never even really let himself think about the words ‘love’ and ‘Billy’ together. Half the time it felt like Bill didn’t even like him. It was, God, it was totally too much.

He started walking again, had to walk away from it. “Yeah, that, that definitely didn’t happen. I mean, I was at a party, maybe I missed him or somethin’ – “

“No, this was like in the morning.” Max was trudging determinedly alongside him again. She turned to Lucas. “What time did he leave your house?”

Lucas shrugged (he was trudging along less determinedly). “Don’t know, we talked for a while. Maybe like – eleven-thirty? I went out to lunch with my dad after. He even said he was going to see you after,” he told Steve. Steve guessed he meant Billy and not his dad. “Definitely didn’t tell me you guys were *in love*, I wouldn’t have been able to eat – “

“ALL RIGHT, Lucas!” Max snarled with disturbing force.

Steve didn’t say anything; he was just walking and thinking. Eleven-thirty. That was after he’d eaten breakfast but before he’d gone over

to the party with Nance. That'd been about an hour after, maybe, right when it had started to rain hard.

What time had he been sitting outside by himself like a dunce, for how long? He hadn't seen *Billy*. He'd seen – Nancy. She'd walked over to him because she'd had to park her car way down on the street since it was so crowded from the party. The usual spots by his house were all taken. So if – a huge *if* because Steve couldn't see him doing it – *if* Bill were to have came by ...

Jeez. Okay no. It was too crazy and too stupid. It was like a bad book or something, one of those paperbacks that his mom'd read and laugh about it while she was drinking her wine. Well, maybe not the gay parts. It was too totally nuts even without the gay parts. There was no way, definitely no way, that Bill would have came to see him or anything; Billy didn't do sorries.

Except – that wasn't really true. Not exactly. He'd said sorry to Lucas apparently, and he'd, yeah, he'd apologized to Steve a couple times before.

They'd never really had a fight this bad before though. Almost, but not quite. That'd been back in January when Billy'd *also* said a ton of really crappy shit to him. He'd climbed into Steve's room after like Romeo or something to apologize. Took him a while but whatever. Later when they'd been getting together he'd said *All that shit from before, I didn't mean it. Was just mad because I wanted you.*

Apparently the lure of Steve Harrington was just too great; it turned Bill into a total crazy asshole. Even now Steve still wasn't entirely sure that he really believed him.

But he did say sorry sometimes. And maybe he wasn't – maybe he hadn't been that mad anymore or something. Maybe he'd, he'd gotten tired of getting loaded at parties. Maybe he'd even forgiven Steve for hitting him. And maybe he'd – maybe he'd really came over like Max and Lucas were saying.

And then he'd seen – god. It was too insane. He could *see* Billy in his stupid souped-up car, maybe down the street, maybe on the corner under that big elm tree. Smoking a cigarette, about to get out.

Probably gearing himself up to try and not be a total dirtbag for ten minutes. And then – well, then there'd been Steve and Nancy. They'd been outside together for a while, Steve guessed.

Billy always got so super insane about Nancy. It was almost funny; it'd *been* funny until it hadn't been. Until he'd realized that maybe Billy actually wanted him. Steve had always figured it was a possessive thing or something, like Bill had to be the best one or the only one or something. He already was. Steve could barely even mention her name until lately without Bill totally flipping his shit or getting into a big sulk. He was just like a kid. If he'd seen Steve with her, he wouldn't have came up to the house. He'd wanna see what they were doing; he'd wanna see what Steve would do.

Steve knew that. He just knew it. And he hadn't seen Billy's car or anything but he'd – and then, when they'd been inside, he'd thought he'd heard –

“Crap,” Steve said. Crap crap crap. Piles of crap. Mountains of crap. What was bigger than a mountain? Actually it was like a crater, it made him want to sink into the street. He already felt like a total asshole for hitting Bill, and then if he'd seen – “Shit – yeah, I don't know, he, he probably saw me with Nancy or something.”

Max stopped walking again; when Steve looked back he almost did a double-take.

Billy always said that Max was real scary when she got mad and Steve would laugh at him. He definitely didn't feel like laughing right now. He wondered if he could make it to his car if he sprinted. Probably not because he'd just fall over his HUGE DUMB MOUTH and be killed instantly.

Max was just standing and looking at him with her blue eyes all narrowed. She actually looked like she could murder him real easy. “What does that mean?” she asked in a dead-calm voice. “Why would it *matter* that he saw you with *Nancy*?”

“Uhhhhh what?” Steve said in a great fear. He inched away from her. He felt like a bug-eyed antelope being hunted on the National Geographic. “Uh, no, nothing, I just – “

Lucas was making a horrible face. “Man, are you *serious*?”

“What? No, I – “

“Dude, please tell me you did *not* hook up with Nancy Wheeler again, we had to hear this shit from you for a whole *year* – “

“No, I didn’t hook up with her!” Steve snapped. Max and Lucas just stared at him. “God. Okay, no, it wasn’t like that, we just kissed a couple times – “

“*STEVE!*” Lucas yelled.

“Oh, my god, I’m not – “

“*COME ON! ARE YOU SERIOUS?*”

“Wait,” Max said slowly, interrupting them. She turned her head slowly to look at him. Nope, definitely couldn’t make it to his car. “So you – you *cheated* on my brother?”

Jesus H. “No, I didn’t – I didn’t cheat on him! He freaking dumped me last week – “

“Guys – “ Lucas started.

“No, he *didn’t!*” cried Max.

“Uh, yes he did, you don’t even know anything – “

“Guys!”

“Yes I do!” snapped Max. “I know you punched him in the *face*! What, did you do that again on Saturday too?”

Steve stared at her, frozen. Of course she’d know. “Okay, that’s – that’s not fair – “

“Oh damn,” said Lucas mutedly.

“Not really helping – ”

“Hey, man, bad enough that you got involved with Mr. Crazy Psycho,

but you cheated on him too? Do you have a death wish?"

"IT WASN'T CHEATING – "

"I can't believe this," Max muttered over him. She fixed him with a glare that almost knocked him off his feet. "You *cheated* on my brother?" she said again; she sounded almost wondering. "WHY WOULD YOU *CHEAT* ON BILLY?"

"OH, MY GOD, I DIDN'T EVEN DO ANYTHING!"

Max whipped her head around. She was turning all red; it was honestly terrifying. "LUCAS! If you and I got into a stupid fight, and you kissed *Melanie Van ZANDT* – "

"Wow, you really want to bring up Melanie right now?" Lucas asked her.

Max ignored him. "If *you* kissed MELANIE VAN ZANDT, would you say that's – mm, HUH, INFIDELITY?"

Steve scoffed. "You're so frickin' retarded, that's not even the same thing – "

"YOU *CHEATED* ON MY *BROTHER*, YOU JERK! HE'S GONNA MURDER YOU!"

"I DIDN'T CHEAT ON – "

"GUYS!" Lucas cried. "MAYBE NOT A GOOD IDEA TO TALK ABOUT THIS IN THE MIDDLE OF MAIN STREET?"

Max scowled at them both. She whipped around and started stomping across the street. A car screeched to a halt and beeped indolently at her.

"MAX!" said Steve and Lucas. Lucas said, "Where the hell are you GOING?"

"I'm going to check if he went to work!"

That was four blocks down in the opposite direction. "Max, come on.

I'll give you a ride!" Steve called to her in resignation. She didn't bother turning around or replying.

Lucas sighed. He sounded pretty resigned too. "Just let her go. She wants to be mad, let her be mad."

"I, I guess."

Now that Max was gone he felt even more awkward there with just Lucas. They walked the remaining half-block down to his car in silence. When they reached the Beamer Steve fiddled around with his keys and unlocked the passenger side. "Hey, are you all right?"

Lucas gave him a pained look and opened up the car door. "Sure. I'm *great*."

Steve went around to his side and got in. He started the car up and they both winced as hot air roared in at them from the AC vents. "Look, man, I'm really sorry about last week, I should have never let him do that to you – "

Lucas looked even more pained. "Okay. It would be so totally cool if we never talked about that again," he said. "I *only* told Max about you guys, you don't have to worry about me saying anything to Mike or Dustin or anyone – "

"Yeah, I'm not worried about that, I'm worried about *you*," Steve told him. Lucas sighed like Steve was killing him but Steve ignored it. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He'd put his seatbelt on and was just sitting with his arms crossed. "I mean, I'm *honestly* still a little traumatized from seeing your *whole* tongue down Billy Hargrove's throat but other than that – "

"Okay, great, you're a riot, that's not what I mean, shithead – "

"Yeah, I'm fine, it's – it's whatever."

Steve waited until the road was clear and then backed the Beamer up onto Main. "Still feel safe alone with me in the car?"

It was kind of a joke but he had to ask. He didn't blame Lucas for freaking out or still being freaked out. He knew what most people thought about guys being with guys and all.

Lucas made a face. "Just glad you aren't trying to get with my girlfriend," he muttered in an embarrassed way.

Steve stared blankly. "What?"

"Man, you really *didn't* talk to him," Lucas said, almost wonderingly. "Look, it's my fault, I wanted to see who you were hooking up with. I – knew you were meeting someone. I thought *Max* liked you."

"Wait, *what?*"

"Steve! The road!" Lucas snapped; Steve braked hard at the light on Cambria. "Holy shit, you're all screwed up." He made another dismissive face. "I can't believe *Billy Hargrove* is your stupid secret girlfriend."

"Yeah, he's not my secret anything anymore," Steve said absently. He had this really blank thick feeling, like he was filled up with clay. He didn't really want to think about anything. *You CHEATED on my brother!*

They waited for the light to change. "So – what, what happened with you and Bill? He really came to talk to you?"

"Yeah," Lucas said shortly.

"Okay, what'd he say to you?"

Lucas shifted around in the passenger seat. He looked massively annoyed and Steve didn't really know why. "I don't know," he said. He said, "That's not really your *business*, is it?"

"Jeez. All right, sorry." Steve drummed his thumbs against the steering wheel. "What, did he threaten you or something?"

Lucas rolled his eyes and didn't answer.

"Look, if he said something to you, you don't have to be afraid that

he's – “

“God, I can really tell that you love him *so much*,” Lucas said sarcastically; Steve stared blankly. Lucas was rolling his eyes. “He didn’t *threaten* me. And look, I – didn’t tell Max about all that crap he said to me, so don’t say *anything* to her, I mean it.”

“What, you – you’re protecting him or something?”

“No.” He still had his arms crossed. “Don’t worry about it, okay?”

They were in front of the auto-body shop now; he could see Max inside through the big window, talking to Hank Gilderman, the owner. Bill had worked for him for about a year. Max’s little shoulders were hunched. “I just don’t understand – “

“Yeah, you wouldn’t,” Lucas said flatly.

“All right, I don’t – “

“I don’t really care about Billy,” Lucas told him. Steve didn’t blame him. “Look, he came over and said sorry to me. I guess he kind of meant it. We had a beautiful moment, all right? I’m like this magic little Negro, I make people want to be better.”

“Uhhhh,” Steve said. He felt really uncomfortable, didn’t know what to say. “I’m sure – “

“That was a joke,” Lucas told him, real dry.

“Thanks, I got that.” The kid looked over at him like he was expecting Steve to say more. “What, so are you guys like cool now?”

Lucas shrugged. “I guess, I don’t know. Depends on if he actually gives me a ride and isn’t a total dick about it.” He was playing around with the strap of his seatbelt.

“Yeah, I still don’t know why you want that.”

“His car is cool.” Steve stared at him so he shrugged again. “It’s a process,” Lucas told him. “I wanna see if he’ll be cool with me.”

“Oh. Okay.” He guessed he got that, sort of anyway. “Well, uh – I hope that works out for you.”

Lucas rolled his eyes and didn’t answer. They both watched Max through the window for a few seconds. “You really think he saw you with Nancy?”

God. “Uh, I dunno.”

“That would ... kind of suck.”

“Yeah.”

“So what, are you guys like done now or whatever?”

“I don’t know,” Steve said again. He didn’t want to be. “Look, she came on to me – “

“Gross, don’t tell me about it!” Lucas begged him. “Girls are so stupid. Billy’s gonna kick your ass.”

“Yeah, I don’t really think so.” Bill could have hauled off and slugged him at any time during their fight last week; he’d been mad enough. He could have hit Steve back but he hadn’t.

He felt even more terrible now, thinking of it. He hadn’t really thought he could feel more terrible. He’d just wanted Billy to shut up; he hadn’t needed to punch him. He could have just left. Maybe he did have a temper like his mom always said. He never would have hit a girl but he’d hit Bill without even thinking of it. “I mean, I don’t know if he even – “

Lucas’s eyes got big and scared. “Uh – incoming.”

Max was stomping her way back over to the Beamer. She wrenched open the backseat and threw herself into the car.

“No luck?” Steve asked her. He could already tell by the scowl on her face that she hadn’t gotten any answer that she’d wanted.

For a moment he didn’t even think she would answer him. He put the car in gear and backed up again. “Max?” Lucas said.

"No." Her voice was low and sullen. In the rearview mirror Steve could see her struggling with her seatbelt; it locked up if you yanked it too hard. "He's not there and Hank said he didn't call or anything. He never calls out."

"What, was he mad or anything?" Steve asked.

"No. Surprised."

She was quiet for a few seconds. Steve drove on down Main Street towards the Sinclairs' house. He belatedly remembered that Max and Lucas weren't really supposed to be hanging out together but hopefully Lucas's parents wouldn't be watching out the window or something. He couldn't see Mr. Sinclair spraying his car with the garden hose like dorky Mr. Wheeler had either.

Once they reached Lucas's house the kid got out of the car. He went around to the backseat and Max opened her door up so he could talk to her. They really were little lovebirds like Billy said.

"Hey, don't worry about it, he's probably fine," Lucas told her. "I mean, it's *Billy*. Even his stupid dad hasn't killed him yet. He's probably off partying like Dustin said."

Max didn't look comforted. "He would have came home."

Apparently Lucas didn't have an answer for that. He straightened up a little. "Thanks for the ride," he told Steve.

"Sure."

"See you in school," he said to Max.

"Yeah, okay." In the rearview mirror Steve watched her muster up a weak smile. "See you."

They watched Lucas head on inside. Max didn't move to get up into the front seat so after another moment Steve started up the car again. They drove in silence back down to the main drag and then over the railroad tracks that the brats always said was the 'bad' part of town. It was Hawkins so there wasn't really a bad part. Well aside from the creepy science facility masquerading as a power company and all.

Max was still being creepy-quiet in the back; Steve felt like a personal chauffeur or something. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Sure,” Max said listlessly. The silence in the car was heavy. He should turn the radio on or something. Max said slowly like she was working out a math problem, “I think he saw you with Nancy and left.”

Oh God. He still didn’t want to think about that. “I don’t, yeah, I don’t really think he’d do that.”

“Why not?” Max snapped. “He was *just* staying here for you anyway, he’s probably halfway to California by now!”

It made him feel so bad that she’d think that; she couldn’t really think that. “He wouldn’t just leave, he’s got that apartment and all.”

“So what?”

Steve chewed on his lip. “Max, you really think he’d do that to you?” She didn’t answer him. “He wouldn’t just leave you here.”

“So where is he?” She sounded so upset and small.

“I don’t know.”

“What, you think something happened to him?”

“No, I don’t – “ God his brain felt all fuzzy like he when was too freaked at night or something. “I – I don’t know. What would have happened to him?”

“I don’t *know*.”

“He’s probably fine.” Like Lucas had told her, Steve said, “I mean, it’s Billy.”

Max didn’t answer him for a moment. Steve watched her look out the window. Then she said, “No. He *left*, or something happened to him. I know *you* don’t care, but I do.”

He could hear what she wasn’t saying, too: *and it’s your fault*.

“That, that’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair, Steve,” Max snapped like a schoolteacher; Steve certainly knew that.

“Look, you don’t have to be such a bitch to me – “

“SCREW YOU!” Max yelled from the backseat; he almost drove off the road. “You’re such a – you and Billy think I’m a, a *joke*, and now you – just think I’m being a bitch, *YOU’RE A BITCH!* I thought you were my FRIEND!”

He felt like total crap again. He hadn’t meant to call her that – she and Bill talked that way to each other all the time. That didn’t mean it was okay for him to do it. He didn’t know what she meant saying they thought she was a joke. He felt so small, like a scorned little kid. He *was* a bitch. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that, okay?”

“Whatever.”

“I am your friend,” Steve told her. It felt weird to say it to a fifteen year old girl but he guessed he meant it. She was as important as Bill or Dustin. “I’m sorry. Okay? Max?”

“Whatever.”

She was giving him the Billy almost-silent treatment; they were both good at it. “Look, you know I care about your brother,” Steve said; in the mirror she just gave him the hairy eyeball. “I wish I knew where he was, I need to talk to him.”

“Why, so you can tell him about how you slept with *Nancy*?” Max asked scathingly.

“Oh, my god, I didn’t sleep with her!”

“*Whatever.*”

“Look, if he’s not back tonight, I’ll help you look for him.”

“He’s not *coming* back. I already know.”

Jesus. They were at her little house; Steve parked and rubbed his face. There were no cars in the driveway, not Billy's Camaro or their dad's crappy sedan or Susan's big old Explorer. His eyes hurt. "Are you gonna be okay alone here?"

"Sure, I'm always okay," Max snapped; she sounded just like Billy. It made him feel really hollow inside.

"Hey, call me tomorrow if you want, get Dustin to call me," Steve told her. "If Bill's not back, I'll give you a ride home. We'll figure it out, okay?"

She didn't answer for a moment. "Don't you have work?"

"It doesn't matter, I can leave early." Linda ran the front; she'd let him go whenever.

Max was getting out of the car and giving him a skeptical look. "Fine. Okay," she said. She grabbed for her skateboard.

"Okay," Steve said too. "Bye." She didn't answer or turn around.

He watched her walk all alone into her empty house. He took his foot off the brake and drove home to his empty house too.

3. Chapter Three

Summary for the Chapter:

Being with Billy was the only thing that Steve had ever wanted that he wasn't really supposed to want. It wasn't something he'd just gone along with because he was supposed to. Not something his parents wanted or to make his friends happy. Billy was just for him and Billy was his even if maybe he didn't want to be. That mattered. Even if it meant something different than what Steve'd thought it still mattered.

Chapter Three

Tuesday at work went by pretty fast because he left at three. Dustin called again and said still no Billy so Max was taking up Steve's offer for a ride.

"Do you think his dad really killed him or something?" Dust asked (he sounded like he was stress-eating again, probably a candy bar since he was at school).

"No his dad didn't fucking kill him, okay, bye," Steve snapped and hung up on him. He was about eighty percent sure.

They were up front and Linda was hunched over her messy desk trying to figure out how she could give Joanne and Terri the same week off for vacation at the end of the month. Steve foresaw himself working a lot of long days and probably Saturdays too; he'd do it since it was Linda. At least he'd get to be on the phones. Linda turned and gave him a big look so he had to tell her that Bill was maybe sort of missing and that Steve needed to give his kid sister a ride. He hoped he didn't sound like a huge creep talking about driving Billy's kid sister around.

Linda felt on the top of her head for her glasses; they were around

her neck. Some of her papers fluttered to the ground and Steve picked them up. "What do you mean he's missin', honey?"

He really didn't want to go into the whole thing with her when he still had no clue what the heck was going on. "Yeah, I don't really know, he's unreliable. You think I can go early and get her?"

Linda said of course he could go early. "Can you bring me your orders before you go?"

Steve said yeah. Back at his desk he finished his stupid paperwork and got ready to leave. Craig was in today and he told Steve, "You're going to miss Joanne's three o'clock breakdown. I guess I can handle her without ya."

Craig was twenty-six and he was such a creep. He was a Super Creep as the brats would say. This was Steve's dad's office and Dad had hired everyone so of course he'd employ a bunch of Super Creepy Creeps and hot ladies. Linda was old so she was an anomaly (that was an SAT word). Steve guessed she was okay for an older lady. He didn't really notice chicks over forty aside from Mrs. Wheeler (hopefully Nancy didn't know that), maybe that was sexist of him or whatever.

Anyway Steve didn't really have the time to tell Craig about what a Super Creep he was being. "I'm sure you will," he said. Craig smiled like he didn't realize Steve was being sarcastic.

He said bye to the girls and gave his stuff to Linda. "Good luck, honey," she told him. She didn't even know how much he needed it; she hadn't seen Max's face yesterday. "You have to buy me lunch tomorrow, I want to know what's going on."

Steve said okay. On the drive back to town he tried hard not to think about Billy or where the fuck he could be but it couldn't really be helped.

He felt crazy stressed out again; he was probably getting all sweaty. He didn't know why Bill would leave Max in the lurch. It didn't make any sense. It just felt really bad so he was trying not to think about it. God. How was he not supposed to think about it.

It was kinda late anyway by the time he got to the high school. Max was waiting for him out on the steps; Lucas was with her so Steve could tell it was going to be another super fun car ride.

They both waved when they saw him which was all right. Max got into the back again and Lucas climbed up front with him. Max was wearing a Marvin the Martian shirt today and these real real short shorts that Billy'd scream his head off about.

Steve didn't take the time to apologize for being late (Bill always told him that he said sorry too much). He also didn't comment on the little shorts even though he was kinda feeling like a Den Dad or whatever. "Hey, no dice?"

"He's still not home." Max sounded really glum.

Steve already knew that but the way she looked made him feel even more bummed out. "Okay, that's okay." He was the best at being sympathetic. "Where you wanna go?"

"Can you take us to my house? I want to look through Billy's room and see if anything's missing."

Okay. "Uh, you couldn't do that last night?" Steve asked her. Him and Lucas at Max's house sounded like about the worst idea ever.

"No. His dad came home like right after you dropped me off, me and Mom couldn't really do anything." She had her arms folded up in the back like she was protecting herself and she slumped even further down in her seat. "Billy hasn't been home for like *three* days and his car's gone. I know *you* guys don't care but *Mom* believes me. She – "

"Okay, we didn't say we didn't *care*," Lucas interrupted her. Steve said, "Max, really?"

Max kept on talking over them like they hadn't even spoke; Lucas gave Steve an annoyed Do You See What I Put Up With look. "MOM SAID she might go to the police tonight. She and Neil got into this huge fight over it."

Billy's dad was such a fucking asshole. If Steve ever got a free punch he'd use it on Bill's dad; he thought about this a lot. "Why'd they get

into a fight?”

Max didn't answer him so Lucas did. "His dad thinks he ... just went back to California too."

"He said it's good that Billy's finally out of our hair." Max's voice was flat and sullen.

"I – all right," Steve said. He didn't know what to say really.

Going to the police was a big deal but he guessed they kind of had to. He really couldn't believe that Bill had been gone for three days already. It made him feel too crazy. "Look, I dunno, is your dad going to be there or what?"

"He's NOT my dad," Max went off on him. She did call him her dad sometimes; Steve had heard her say it.

He didn't point this out. "Okay, okay, I just don't really think it's a good if we all – "

"He's not home, he stays at his office until six when he actually goes in," Max said. "That's why I want to go *now*."

Lucas was giving her a weird look. "Do we have time for that?"

Max sent him a huge glare back. "You can just go if you want!" she snapped. "I don't *care* what you do! Why are you even here right now?"

"Oh, my god, Max, you need to take like the *hugest* chill pill and stop trashing me!" Lucas was turning and making a face at her. They were so in love; Max looked like she wanted to slug him in the face. "I said, like, *one thing* – "

"Yeah, I already know you don't care about my brother, WHY don't you just go to MICHAEL'S house and hold his hand like you always do – "

"OKAY, FIRST OF ALL, I'VE NEVER EVEN DONE THAT IN MY *LIFE* – "

“Okay, okay, hey!” Steve interrupted them loudly. “Come on, you’re giving me a fucking headache! Why are you guys frickin’ yelling at each other right now?”

Lucas turned in his seat to look at him. “Okay, here’s the thing,” he said. “So ... El’s kind of missing too, and Mike is *freaking* out.”

“Wait, what?” Steve said blankly. “Since when?”

“We’re not really sure. Sunday or Monday or something. Um, I don’t think it’s like ... the same as before. Hopper can’t find her.”

“Okay, what does that mean, he can’t find her?”

Lucas shrugged like Steve was stupid. “I don’t know. She’s just gone.”

For the last like year or so – God, Steve couldn’t really believe it had been a whole year – El had been having these weird freakouts where she snuck out of her house and went wanderin’ around the whole town. She could never remember why or where she was; it was like she was losing her memory. The kids had all these theories about it.

Steve kind of thought maybe it was a stress thing or something. Maybe she was scared of getting sent back to the lab. Post Stress Disorder; there was definitely supposed to be another word in there. Not like anyone paid attention to him when he’d tried to say it. She’d shown up at Billy’s work a couple times but he didn’t know if that had anything to do with it or if she’d just wanted to see Bill. Billy had this way about him that made you want to hang around him even when he was being a total dick to you. It was like his own special superpower.

“Wait, okay, back up for a minute,” Steve said. “I don’t – yeah, I just talked to Dustin, he didn’t say anything about El being gone – ”

“We *just* found out,” Lucas told him. “I don’t even think Mike was home last night anyway, he was with Hopper or – yeah, I don’t really know. He’s not – “

“I thought you guys were going there last night.” Steve rubbed his face. “Dustin said – “

“Oh, yeah, like Dustin would go to Mike’s when he could hook up with Rebecca?” Max sneered.

Lucas shuddered exaggeratedly (Steve didn’t blame him). “*Please* don’t talk about that,” he begged her. He told Steve, “Will’s not home either, he just came to school to tell us everything. I think his mom has been helping them look. He wanted us to come with him, but *someone* said we had to wait for you.” Max was making another awful face at his back. “We’re supposed to go to Mike’s *actual house* later now.”

“Yeah, later, *after* I find Billy,” Max butted in like a baby Sherlock Holmes.

Too much stuff was happening; Steve put the Beamer in gear finally. “Okay, yeah, I’ll – I can drop you guys off.” He looked at Max in the mirror. “Sure you wanna go to your house?” She nodded solemnly. “Okay.”

It was another fun drive like he’d thought. Lucas kept fidgeting around awkwardly and Max some kind of a silent presence again. “I hope El’s okay,” Lucas said in this muted voice. “Maybe she’s with – with Billy or something.”

Now Max was making an even more horrible face in the backseat. “That’s *totally* stupid, why would they be together?”

“Hey, he always says he wants to run off with her. Maybe he finally did it.”

“Yeah, I don’t really think he would do that,” Steve said before Max could lean up over the seat and actually obliterate Lucas. She always got so crazy about El and Billy hanging out; Steve didn’t know how Bill couldn’t see that she was just jealous.

“Why do you always think Billy’s going to do all this *screwed up* crap?” Max demanded; Lucas gave her a big look.

“I’m not saying he kidnapped her or anything! She’d probably go with him.”

“No she *wouldn’t*,” Max said all crazy.

“OKAY, *well*, if they’re both gone, wouldn’t that be, like, I don’t know, the best scenario?”

“Uh, no, because Hopper would *kill* him!” Max was leaning dangerously up in her seat to obliterate Lucas.

“Do *NOT* PUNCH ME!” Lucas yelled without turning around. “I don’t see you coming up with any – “

“Guys, calm down with the crazy theories, okay?” Steve begged them. Max kicked at Lucas’s seat so he leaned back over and flicked her in the forehead; she caught his arm and slugged him.

“STOP HITTING ME!” she roared.

“I’M NOT HITTING YOU, YOU HIT ME!”

“GUYS!” Steve said; Max kicked at his seat too.

Steve hunched over the steering wheel. He was going to get another migraine; it was starting now. His contacts hurt his eyes. He should have worn his glasses.

Lucas looked annoyed. “I’m *just saying*,” he said again.

“Yeah well, maybe, maybe don’t, you’re makin’ Max all upset – “

“THANKS, I can speak for myself,” Max snapped at him. Jeez. She went off: “Until El, who NEVER EVEN TALKS.”

“Oh, my god, here we go,” Lucas muttered; Max looked murderous.

Steve ignored them. Talking about Eleven with the kids always made him feel kind of weird and uneasy. It didn’t really make any sense to him even though he felt that way. El was the whole reason why he’d even ended up talking to all the brats in the first place. She was also the reason why all the crazy shit had been happening in town for the last three years.

That wasn’t really fair. Steve knew she wasn’t the real reason – it just felt that way. It made him feel bad that he felt that way. She was a sweet kid and he liked her well enough even if she didn’t care about

him at all; he didn't kid with himself that they were actually friends or anything.

She was such a *little* kid too. He thought she was actually a year or so younger than Max and the guys. She was such a little kid and she'd been through so much; Steve wished she'd had an easier time of it. Even so – this was the asshole part of him talking – he had to admit he wouldn't cry his eyes out or anything if she and Hopper decided to move out to Mexico and take all their creepy shit with them. Better yet, Alaska.

He'd only seen her a handful of times really anyway. Gave her a few rides, picked her and Mike up to go to the movies once. She was always looking at him in a weird way, making him feel weird. Billy liked her a ton and that made Steve feel weird too; she'd won him over in two minutes moving stuff in the diner with her mind. It'd taken Steve a lot longer to win Bill over.

Not that Steve had been trying to win him over or anything. All that bad shit had happened with them last year and then Bill had straight-up ignored him for months after; he'd never tried to say *Sorry for kicking your ass* or anything. Even now he'd never really said it. Then Bill'd gotten involved in the Monster Squad's stuff too and they'd just ended up hangin' around each other all the time for some reason.

Okay Steve knew the reason. He hadn't really been able to believe that Bill hadn't tried to turn Eleven in or something; he hadn't been able to leave Billy alone. And he guessed like – like Lucas had said yesterday, he'd wanted to see if Bill could be cool with him too. He'd been all alone after everyone had left for college and he'd kinda just told himself he had nothing better to do. Then Bill *had* been cool with him and Steve had started up with his obsessive crap right away. When he looked back on it he kind of guessed maybe he'd wanted Billy the whole time. He didn't know how he hadn't known he'd wanted him the whole time. So much shit had happened.

Not only could El move stuff with her mind but she could *see* stuff with her mind too; it was too freaky. Steve guessed she and Bill had had some big moment together that he didn't know about or whatever. The couple times he'd been out with 'em all she and Billy were always talkin' together and making Mike crazy jealous – it was

kind of funny. Bill had even taken her out to see her mom about a month ago; it'd been some huge thing with Hopper.

They'd had to go out and find her in the woods one night, just about two weeks ago. It'd been too freaky and Steve still didn't like to think about it. She'd known that he and Bill had kinda been on a date too.

It made him wonder what else she knew. He didn't like thinking about it, what all she could know. If she knew stuff about Bill she could know stuff about Steve, too. She could know that he wasn't really cool like he wanted to be; he wasn't really a good person like he tried to be.

"Uh, Steve? Are we still going or what?"

Lucas was looking at him and Max was hunched forward in the backseat looking at him too. Steve realized he was just sitting there like a moron thinking his thoughts. They'd been idling at the end of the street by the high school; the blonde chick in the Oldsmobile behind them looked about a quarter-second away from laying on her horn.

"Right. Yeah, sorry." He kept on driving.

It only took about another five minutes to get to Max's house – she and Bill lived pretty close to the school. The sky was all gray and once again there were no other cars in the driveway. Steve parked on the street anyway and then they all sat looking up at the house.

"Are you *sure* your stepdad's not gonna be home?"

Max was getting out of the car in her typical annoyed fashion and stomping up the sidewalk. "Yes, I'm sure!"

"Funny. I've heard that before." Lucas was following after her so Steve took off his seatbelt too.

"He's *not* allowed to touch my friends again," Max said with all of her fifteen-year-old confidence. She seemed to have a lot of it; Steve was envious. "Mom said."

That was so reassuring. Steve and Lucas looked at each other and

then back at the house.

They went up the million steps and waited as Max unlocked the door and let them in. The house was a little messy like always. Not that Steve minded or anything. There were a bunch of empty beer bottles on the coffee table, probably from Bill's loser dad.

Steve looked around and tried not to feel weird. It didn't really work – he still felt pretty weird. Billy's dad was a traveling salesman and he wasn't home half the time so Steve had been over kind of a lot. It felt almost wrong to be at the place without Billy though, like he was intruding or something.

Usually when he was there he was just looking at Bill. It felt strange to notice all this mundane stuff about the house. The faded wallpaper or little dent in the side of coffee table, Susan's knitting stuff everywhere. Some ugly lamp that was covered in shells on the end table that Steve or Billy almost always knocked over when they got too stupid watching hockey; Max was always yelling at them for it.

The whole living room just seemed weirdly smaller without Billy there yelling and taking up space. Max seemed smaller too without Bill there for her to yell back at. There was a big rip in one of the sofa cushions that Steve'd never noticed before; he and Bill'd hooked up on that couch like three times.

Max glared at the beer bottles and then led them into Bill's room. She didn't even hesitate or look like she feared for her life going in. Steve and Lucas followed her and then they all just stood there.

"Yeah, what exactly are we supposed to be looking for?" Steve asked her. He didn't want to be in here; it felt even more like intruding.

Max gave him a look. "I don't *know*," she said. "If he left, he'd take stuff, right?"

"He doesn't even *have* anything," Lucas said; Max gave him a death glare.

Steve stood there awkwardly while Max poked around in Bill's dresser and his closet. He looked around the room. Bill's room was

kind of messy too; he never cared about his stuff.

He really didn't have too much like Lucas had said. Buncha dirty clothes on the floor, an empty pack of cigarettes on his windowsill. Two boxes of records that he never put away and an unmade bed. Even though his bed wasn't made he had two shirts folded on it; they were both Steve's. Steve stared at the shirts as Max went over to the little dresser and fussed around with the papers on top of it. She tugged Billy's American Lit textbook off the pile and a photograph fell out of it and fluttered onto the floor. They all looked down at it.

It was this picture of Max and Billy that Steve'd snapped at Christmastime when they'd all been at the Wheeler's house; he remembered how Max'd made him take the shot with her fancy Polaroid that Bill'd got her. She was mugging for the camera and Bill looked annoyed like he always did in pictures.

They all stared at the photograph on the floor. Max's face turned all red again and her eyes flooded over; Steve had never felt more horrible in his life.

She just stared down at the picture. Lucas said, "Hey, Max, it's okay."

Max ignored him. She picked the picture up and slid it into her shorts' pocket and then kept going through Billy's stuff. Steve was pretty sure she was trying to calm herself down so he didn't say anything.

She stopped and made a weird face. "Um, I guess – this is – yours. Do you want it?"

She thrust a pile of papers at Steve; it was his Indiana State application. It wasn't even that wrinkled. Billy had filled out the first two pages.

Steve took that and stared at it too. "Uh, thanks," he said like a moron. Max ignored him.

Lucas looked majorly uncomfortable in Billy's room too. He leaned against the rickety closet door – it never shut right – and watched Max with a little frown on his face. "Max, I'm sorry, but there's

nothing here for him to take.”

She had a little frown on too. “No, he – he had money or something. Unless his dad took that already.”

“What, he doesn’t have a bank account like a normal person?” Lucas asked. He was making a face that said Billy Hargrove didn’t do anything like a normal person.

Max thunked down onto her knees and started ferreting her way under Bill’s little bed. Muffled: “His boss cuts his checks, he always has cash.” She screamed like a crazy person and her feet jerked; Steve and Lucas jumped. “Sorry! Gross! There’s a dead wasp under here!”

“Jesus Christ, Max,” Steve said and Lucas said, “Oh my *frickin’* god.”

“Sorry!” She was worming her way back out. When she sat back up she was holding an old shoe box. *Secret Billy stuff*, Steve’d said before like a nerd.

“No, no way,” he told her now.

Lucas looked so weirded out that it was almost funny. “What the hell is *that*?”

“It’s Billy’s important stuff!”

“Like what, a severed head? *Mein Kampf*?” Max gave Lucas a big annoyed look. “Oh, my god, okay, sorry.”

Max put the shoe box on the bed and they all looked at it. “Should I open it?”

“Uh, yeah, no way,” Steve said again; Max stared over at Lucas.

Lucas blinked and looked back at her incredulously. “What, *me*? No thanks, I like living.”

They both stared at Steve.

Steve blinked too. “What, what? Me? No, this is totally stupid.” They stared at him some more. “Oh, my god, are you ser – why do *I* have

to look through it?”

“Billy’s *already* going to kill you for cheating on him,” Max pointed out nicely. “You might as well snoop through his stuff too.”

“Uh, okay, how about – no, that’s not happening.” Billy hoarded the dumb old junk in that box like a dragon. It was probably rigged up to electrocute you or something.

“Steve!” Max looked annoyed like she hadn’t been the one to lead them in here. “Neil comes home in like an *hour*, can you just do it?”

Bill and Max and Nancy all had something in common with their big blue eyes; they could glare at him and make him do about anything in a single minute. Steve sat on the bed like a dunce and took the stupid shoe box. “You are such a fucking brat,” he told Max. She made him feel like total crap. He added, “I didn’t *cheat* on him.”

“*Lucas*, so do you think that if – “

“Oh MY GOD, I’m NOT doing this with you guys again,” Lucas said loudly. “Just look in the serial killer box and see if there’s money!”

“Fine, okay, okay.”

He opened up the shoe box and didn’t get electrocuted. He felt massively guilty looking through Billy’s stuff. Max was still glaring her head off at him though so he had to do it.

Bill had a lot of pictures of his mom and of his old girlfriend; Steve tried not to look at them too much. He had a huge bag of weed (“Nice,” said Lucas like a little geek) and a bunch of movie stubs saved like a sentimental grandma or something. Steve found *Stand By Me* and *The Thing*; they’d seen those both together.

He found these bracelets that Billy and Max had gotten for Eleven for her birthday a couple weeks ago; that was when they’d been out in the city with Steve. They were still in the little yellow plastic bag from the store. Some birthday present – maybe she’d finally get it next Christmas or something. They barely ever saw El. Billy said before that Hopper kept the kid locked up like an inmate. Steve didn’t exactly blame him, he didn’t say.

He kept digging through the stupid shoe box. There was a little model car of a Chevy Firebird, a cigarette butt that had lipstick on it and the receipt for his car. He had some baseball cards and a girl's class ring, must be from back in California. Probably his old girlfriend's but Steve didn't know why he wouldn't have given that back to her. Smushed up penny from Disneyland, like you could run through those machines. A napkin from the diner that Steve'd wrote *FUCK YOU* on back near Christmas when he and Bill and Max had been out getting food. He'd just gotten his wisdom teeth out and he couldn't talk too much because it hurt so bad. Billy and Max had teased him so much that night he thought he'd die. They were so fun.

It made him feel so weird that Bill had kept that stupid piece of paper; it'd been so long ago. They hadn't even hooked up then yet or whatever.

Inside of an old cassette case there was some real dirty letter that Bill'd written to his girlfriend; Steve really didn't need to see that. When he unfolded the letter there was a big wad of cash, mostly twenties.

Steve handed it over to Max. "There. Happy?" She stared at him, she didn't look happy. Steve folded up the little letter and put it back in the cassette case. "Why wouldn't he take his money?"

"I don't know."

That felt bad too. She didn't say anything else so Steve closed up the shoe box and gave that back to her too.

They probably all would have kept standing there like morons (well, Steve was sitting, still like a moron though) but the phone started ringing out in the living room. Max shoved the shoe box back under Billy's bed and thundered out of the room to go and answer it.

Steve looked up at Lucas; he made a wry little face and shrugged. They both followed Max into the living room.

She was holding the phone up to her ear and wrapping the cord around her wrist. Steve was pretty sure that little frown was painted onto her face at this point; it wasn't going anywhere. "Yeah, I know.

Sorry,” she said into the phone in a subdued way. “Are you guys okay?” She made a face. “No, I would guess *not*. Yeah, he’s here with me.” She looked up at Lucas and then Steve; her frown deepened. “Steve? Um, yeah, he’s ... here too. Yeah, we were. There’s ... there’s nothing here.”

“Who is it?” Lucas asked; Max ignored him.

“Yeah, we were looking ... oh, okay. Wait, what?” She was leaning against the back of the couch. “Okay, what is it? OKAY, GOD! Yeah, okay. Yeah, I will.” She listened some more and made a face. “I’ll tell him. Yeah, now. Thanks. Bye.”

She hung up the phone and stared at the boys some more. “Um ... that was Mike. He wants us to go over there now.”

No one said anything again. “I can give you guys a ride over,” Steve said to break the silence. “Drop you off or whatever.”

Max had a strange look on her face. “No, he says he wants you to come too.”

“Uh, why?”

It wasn’t that he didn’t care about Eleven or anything. He just usually wasn’t included in any of the brat’s plans unless Dustin threw a huge fit; he was used to it. Mike cared about El and Dungeons and Dragons and not much else.

“I don’t know. He said he has something for us.”

That was even weirder. “Okay, what?”

“I don’t *know*, Steve!” Max was giving him the look that said he was being super annoying; he’d only asked two things.

“Okay, okay.”

“Are we done here?” Lucas asked her.

Max looked around at her empty living room, the beer bottles on the coffee table. She was still holding Bill’s money. “I guess so,” she said.

Off to Mike's house they went. It was about a ten minute drive and no one talked for a while. Lucas sat in the back with Max to count the cash out and Steve felt like a chauffeur again. Max counted almost three hundred dollars; that was bad. Why wouldn't Bill take his money.

No one answered the front door at the Wheelers' so Lucas just walked right on in; Steve and Max hesitated and then followed. Another place to feel weird in.

"Guys?" Lucas called out.

"WE'RE IN THE BASEMENT!" Steve couldn't tell if that was Mike or Will. Probably Mike because Will wasn't ever really loud. He was the least annoying of the kids, maybe because Steve didn't see him too much. Max was cool and all but damn she had a mouth on her.

Downstairs in the Wheelers' basement Will and Dustin were sitting together on one of the couches and Mike was pacing back and forth like he was in a soap opera. Nancy wasn't there with them; Steve kind of thought that was pretty typical of her even if she'd been cool with him all weekend.

Mike looked up as they all tromped down the steps. "God, it took you long enough."

"Sorry," Max huffed. She didn't sound too sorry.

"What's going on, man?" Steve asked him. "Are you all right?"

"Obviously I'm not all right, my girlfriend's missing – "

Max blew her cheeks out like a puffer-fish; Billy always said she looked like she'd swallowed a goldfish. "We came over as fast as we could, you know my brother's still not home too – "

"Max, I have a new theory about that, I think they ran off together!" Dustin told her from the couch.

"*SEE?*" said Lucas.

"OH, MY GOD!" Max looked about ready to kill the whole room. "NO THEY DIDN'T! You said she left on Sunday, Billy was already gone!"

"He probably slept in her bushes," Dustin said; Steve guessed he thought it was a joke or something. He said, "Man, come on," and Max said, "NO, HE DIDN'T."

Mike had a weird expression on his face. "Um .. that's ... actually what I need to talk to you guys about."

Max stopped glaring and looked at him askance. "What?"

Mike just stared at her for a second too and then started talking. "I was waiting for everyone to get here, I don't feel like saying all this stuff twice. El's been missing since Hopper came home on Sunday," he said; he was mostly filling Steve in. "I've been with him, like, the whole time – he's going totally nuts. She's not at her aunt's house, or – we checked – we checked like, like all over town. Sometimes when she's gone, it's like I can – I can *see* her, but she's not ... she's not anywhere. We looked everywhere." His face fell a little.

Steve didn't really know what to say. It seemed like he was always saying the wrong thing around Mike. "Your mom let you go off with Hopper?"

"Nope, I'm super grounded now," Mike told him. "But she can't – she doesn't know anything anyway. It doesn't – " he made a face like a candle melting – "it doesn't *matter*, that's not important. I have to tell you guys – "

"Jesus Christ, so tell us, we've been sitting here for an hour!" That was Dustin.

"I WAS WAITING FOR MAX AND STEVE!"

"Thanks, Mike," Lucas said dryly.

Mike made a crazy hand gesture. “Oh, MY *GOD*, obviously you too –”

“I’m always the last person to know anything, you guys do this on purpose – “

“Oh, *are* you?”

“ – because you’re always with Max – !”

“Uh, no, I’m not, we’re not even *supposed* to be – “

“GUYS!” Steve yelled. “Jesus, you kids never frickin stop – Mike, come on. What is it?”

“Okay, okay.” Mike flopped down onto the couch, then stood up again right away like a weird person. His normally flat black hair was sticking up like crazy; he looked like he’d stuck his finger in an electrical socket (that didn’t really happen, though – Steve and Tommy had tried it when they’d been like twelve). “So I finally got home today around like eleven – “

“Cute,” Lucas said.

Mike ignored him. “After my mom flipped out on me I was down here and I fell asleep – “

“Really? That’s so great, Mike, you really have your priorities in order,” Max sneered. She had her arms crossed in her usual defensive position.

“YOU’RE SUCH A – “

“Max, lay off him, okay?” Steve begged her.

“Oh, what, are you my *keeper* now that Billy’s gone?”

Steve rubbed his face and ignored her. She was acting like such a – okay there was definitely a word worse than ‘brat’ but he wasn’t going to say it or think it. He didn’t like her saying Bill was *gone* either. “Mike, just talk, okay?”

“Okay, first off, I didn’t sleep for like TWO DAYS!” Mike yelled at Max; she wiped a fake tear away and he made a horrible face at her. “God, I can’t even deal with you – so I came home and I FELL ASLEEP, SHOOT ME OKAY, and I, I had this dream about El – “

Awesome. It was already too fucking weird. Steve pushed his hair away from his face. “Great, of course. So, like, was this a normal-person dream or a freaky dream?”

“Definitely freaky,” Mike affirmed. “She – “

“Figures,” Lucas put in; Steve turned and made a face at him. They *really* never stopped.

Mike ignored them. “It was totally crazy, it was like I was there with her or something – “

“Okay, did you find out where she IS?” Steve asked him.

“If I knew where she was do you think I’d be in my STUPID BASEMENT right now?!” Mike demanded. “She was in this, this, I don’t know, this creepy warehouse or a, an old store room or something! I don’t think she knows *where* she is. She’s not – really hurt or anything, but she was *really* scared. And ... when I woke up, I was holding her bracelet.” He opened up his clenched fist; he was holding a little blue bracelet or a hair tie or something.

Holy crap. Everyone started going off at once.

“Oh my god! Is she okay?”

“*How* did you get that?”

“Is she at the lab again or something?”

“No, we looked there already! She’s not anywhere!”

Steve was so not equipped to deal with this — didn’t want to deal with it, didn’t want to be there. “Yeah, okay, that makes NO SENSE, how the hell did you get that from her?”

“I JUST said – “

“You need to, yeah, you need to give that to a frickin’ adult or something, does Hop know you have that?”

Mike’s face wrinkled up into one of his annoyed expressions (he had like five or six). “Of course he knows, I already called him!”

“Okay, so what’d he – “

“What’s he going to do, extract DNA from it?”

Jesus H. “Yeah, well, I’m just sayin’ – “

“You always have something to say, can you just SHUT UP for LITERALLY two seconds?” Mike yelled in his face like a nutjob. “God! That’s not ... the only thing she gave me. There was – uh. This too.” He dug around in the pocket of his cargo shorts and thrust something in Steve’s face, actually he almost cracked him in the nose with it.

It was Billy’s necklace. He had this pendant from his dead mom that he always wore; Steve stared at it spinning on its heavy chain. He had this insane blank feeling again, like he was the one dreaming or something.

Lucas made a noise that kind of sounded like a chicken being strangled and clapped his hands in Max’s face. “Oh, WHAT? I! TOLD! YOU!”

Max batted his hands away, not gently. “Oh, my god, shut *up!* Mike, what does that – “

Steve was still staring at the necklace. He interrupted Max, “Yeah, I don’t – why, why the hell do you have that? Is that like a, a, a joke or something?” He was starting up his stuttering thing; he needed to calm the hell down.

“Uh, no, it’s not a joke.” Mike was looking at him like he was dumb. “I just told you – “

“Why the hell do you have that? How did you get that?”

“I JUST TOLD YOU – “

“What, that you had a, a frickin’ *dream*? She, what, she sent that shit to you?”

“No, it was more like – I, I don’t know! She was *there* and she showed it to me and I took it!”

“Yeah, again, that makes no sense – “ There was, like, physics and stuff. He didn’t understand it but there was stuff. “What, she can just fucking do that? Why can’t she just come back?”

“OBVIOUSLY she can’t just come back – “

“He *just* said – “

“Wait, so did Billy kidnap her or something?” That was Dustin.

Max rounded on him in two seconds. “HE DIDN’T KIDNAP HER, MORON!”

“Okay, well why else would she have his – ”

“He wouldn’t do that!”

“He always says he’s gonna take her to Mexico and marry her!”

“I don’t think he’d really do that,” Will said quietly. It was the first time he’d spoke.

“Guys! Shut up!” Mike said. He was *still* holding Billy’s necklace – Bill would totally kill him if he knew he had it, Steve thought absently. “I don’t think he ... he didn’t take her or anything. I mean, I don’t know – “ he made a horrible face – “I guess he’s with her. She was really – scared for him. I think.”

“Did you SEE HIM?” Max was getting right in Mike’s face.

“No, I don’t – I don’t think so. I don’t really remember.”

Steve definitely had a migraine; this was way too much. “Great, you don’t remember, you didn’t see where she was, you didn’t see Bill – ”

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO SCREAM AT ME!” Mike totally screamed at

him. “This JUST happened, I don’t know what to – I thought maybe you’d, you’d want it or something.” His eyes flicked between Steve and Max, then he stared at Steve. “Are you going to take it or what?”

“Oh, thanks, Mike,” Max snapped.

“God, sorry! Or you! I don’t know!”

“Yeah, I, I’ll take it,” Steve said.

“Uh. Okay.” Mike stared at him awkwardly and then handed over the necklace; it felt cold. Steve stared at it. “Are you ... okay?”

Steve didn’t know. “Uh. I don’t know.”

“Do you need to sit down or something?”

“No, I don’t need to sit down!”

“Guys, guys! Calm down! Hey, this means they’re both alive, right? That’s a *good thing*, that means we can find them.” Dustin was always trying to reassure everyone; he had this little hopeful half-smile on his face. “Jeez, you’re acting like Billy’s Steve’s boyfriend or something.”

Everyone stared at him. Well, except Will, who was just staring at Steve. Nobody said anything. Crap.

Dustin’s smile faded slowly into a perplexed expression. He looked around at everyone. “What?”

Mike glanced around too. “... wait. We – all know, right?”

“Know what?” Dustin looked totally blank.

“About – uh – “ He looked at Steve again, helpless.

Steve stared back, equally helpless. Shit.

“Hold on.” Lucas was rubbing his face. “*You* knew about them? And you didn’t say anything?”

“I don’t care what they do!”

“ARE YOU SERIOUS? I JUST GOT MY ASS KICKED OVER THIS!”

“*What?*” Mike looked totally confused.

“Oh, my god!” Max squawked. “Why the hell does everyone know but me?” She smacked Steve in the arm. “You guys told *Mike?*”

“Uh, no, I didn’t tell him – ”

Dustin’s head was whipping around like a cartoon. “What are you guys *talking* about?”

“Steve and ... “ Mike’s eyes were wide; he looked over at Steve. “I – sorry, I ... thought everyone knew already.”

“I didn’t know,” Will said. He was still just looking at Steve in this frozen sort of way, the same way that Steve felt really.

“Oh, my god, can someone please tell me what the hell you’re talking about?” Dustin begged.

Steve just stood there holding Bill’s necklace like a big dumb idiot and not saying anything. He didn’t know what to say. Too much stuff was happening and this wasn’t really the way he’d wanted Dust to find out about the whole thing, if he ever even found out. Apparently there was nothing to find out if you talked to Billy. Who was. Who was gone right now. “Uh, it’s not – “

“Steve!” Max’s eyes looked like fire or something; she was really annoyed. “Just *tell* him!”

“Tell me what?” Dustin said; everyone looked at him again for a long moment. “Why are you guys acting so weird?”

No one said anything so Max gave out a big huff. “You are *such* a baby,” she said. Then she said, “Steve and Billy are together,” to Dustin.

Dustin stared at her blankly. “What, I thought he was with El.”

“Oh, my god, man!” Lucas yelled. “Not RIGHT NOW, you dumbass! ”

“What’s she talking about?” Dustin asked; he was staring at Steve now. He seemed a little lost. His blue eyes were wide and his brows were drawn down in a flat line, almost connected, cartoonish. He looked around again.

“They’re *together*. Like dating?”

“Uh, no they’re not,” Dustin said. “Steve has a girlfriend.”

Steve rubbed his face. “Okay, uh,” he said. “Here’s the thing – “

“Yeah, his girlfriend is named *Billy*,” Lucas put in like a little shithead.

“He’s NOT a girl!” Max said.

“They hooked up in my downstairs bathroom!” Mike yelled.

Steve stared at him. He probably looked like a cartoon too. “Wait, you KNEW ABOUT THAT?”

Mike was making his melted-candle face. “I’m not stupid! What, you were by yourself smoking Billy’s gross cigarettes in my bathroom for a half hour?”

“Oh, my god,” Steve said like an overwhelmed idiot; Max said, “Wait, *when* exactly was this?”

Dustin still looked totally lost. Instead of his usual little smile he now wore a confused frown, like he was tryin’ to figure out a homework problem. “Uh, no, sorry, Steve has a girlfriend,” he said again. He looked over at Steve and it made him feel two inches tall. “You ... told me all about her.”

Bill hadn’t wanted to tell Max about him and Steve – well, he hadn’t wanted to tell anyone. He’d left these huge fucking marks all over Steve’s neck one time and Steve had had to make up some crap and lie to Dustin about it; he said he’d met a girl who didn’t live in town.

Dustin knowing anything meant all the other kids had found out in about a minute. Max had been apoplectic over it (another SAT word). Steve’d wanted to tell her; Billy hadn’t. He’d gotten a big kick out of

making her feel all bad for him over Steve's fake girlfriend. She'd even made him frickin' brownies one time – it was like he'd been playing a game with her or something.

Maybe Steve had been playing a game with Dustin too; he hadn't meant to. He'd kind of wanted to talk to someone about Billy even if he couldn't let them know it was Billy. He remembered how he'd found it kind of funny, telling Dust all these details about some chick when it was just Bill he'd been with.

It didn't feel funny now. The way Dustin was looking at him now made him feel like total shit.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, man. I didn't know how to tell you."

Dustin looked even more lost. His eyebrows went down even further. "Wait, so there's ... no girl?"

Everyone stared some more. "No girl," Steve repeated.

"Uh, okay. So, what – you, you're dating *Billy*? As in Max's *psycho brother* Billy?" Dustin poked her for emphasis; Max swatted him.

"Uh, I don't – wouldn't really say dating –"

"YES THEY ARE!" Max hollered. "THEY WENT TO THE DRIVE-IN!"

"Ew, really?" said Lucas.

She scowled at him. "Do you *really* have to make a comment right now?"

"This does not make any sense, I DID NOT SEE THIS IN MY NOTES." Dustin talked over them.

"Oh my god," moaned Mike and Lucas; Dustin ignored them.

"Look, we just didn't wanna – tell anybody," Steve told him.

Dustin just stared at him incredulously; he had a really weird hurt look on his face. "Oh, right! Okay! So why'd you tell me all this made-up crap about some hot girl?"

"I ... " He didn't have anything to say to that.

"BECAUSE IT'S ACTUALLY SOME GUY? STEVE, ARE YOU CRAZY?"

"Thanks, I'm not crazy – "

"Wait, so you're gay? How did I not know you were gay?"

Oh God, it was going to be like Linda all over again, but way worse.

"Okay, I'm not gay – "

"How is that not gay, you're dating a dude!" Dustin said. "How could you not tell me you're GAY? I JUST SWAM IN YOUR POOL ALL MONTH!"

"Dustin! What the hell does that have to do with anything?" Max snapped.

"Okay, well, if he likes to look at guys all the time – "

"PLEASE, EVEN STEVE CAN DO SO MUCH BETTER THAN YOU!"

"Okay, Max," Steve said. He should probably feel insulted; he still felt totally blank. Okay a little hurt too. "Dustin, I'm not gay – "

"YOU'RE DATING A GUY! HOW IS THAT NOT GAY?"

"Dude, we actually have bigger problems than Steve's gross love life – "

"Thanks, Mike – "

"You know, my dad says that two guys being together is, like, a mental disease," Lucas said in this contemplative voice. "He says that's how you get AIDS and stuff." Everyone stared at him and he made a face. "I didn't say *I* thought it!"

"You are being *such* an asshole right now," Max seethed.

"I DIDN'T SAY I THOUGHT IT!" Lucas yelled again. "Okay, sorry, you've known for like a *year* or whatever that your brother's gay, he *just* told me three days ago!"

Max stared at him. “He actually said that to you?”

“Wait, you guys have been doing this for a YEAR?” That was Dustin again.

“No, come on, I didn’t even talk to him a year ago,” Steve told him.

Dustin just stared through him as if he hadn’t even said anything. He looked totally shocked, like when Steve had had to explain to him why it was funny that people kept writing 69 on the board in his math class last year. “Steve, how can you guys be gay, you went out with Nancy for like a year. Billy slept with all those girls – “

“Nope, just Steve,” Max put in. She really did love to tell all of Bill’s business. She paused. “Well, and Rachel Evangelista.”

“Oh, my god, that is so great,” said Lucas.

“He really slept with her?” Will said.

“Just one time!”

“GUYS!” said Mike. “None of this really matters, can we just – ”

“UH, STEVE’S GAY, I THINK THAT MATTERS A LITTLE!” Dustin yelled.

“I’M NOT GAY!” Steve said. He was getting mad and he didn’t know what it mattered so much.

“HOW IS THAT NOT GAY?”

“Dude, you’re being such a piece of shit to me right now – “

“Oh, excuse me, how am I supposed to act! YOU NEVER TOLD ME THAT YOU LIKE DUDES – “

“Do you blame him? You’re *kind of* being a dick,” Lucas put in helpfully.

“You JUST SAID he has a mental disorder – “

“Oh, my god! *I* didn’t say it!”

“Why do you think I didn’t tell you, you’re acting like a total prick – ”

“Yeah, because you LIED to me!” Dustin yelled back at him. “WE’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO KEEP SECRETS IN THE PARTY, YOU’RE OUR ROGUE, NOT A FAIRY! I thought you were my friend, why’d you lie?”

I thought you were my friend. That was the second time in two days one of the kids had said that to him; Steve just stared back mutedly.

Max was going off on his behalf. “You *never* let us into your stupid party anyway! You guys never tell us ANYTHING!”

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? YES WE DO!” Dustin yelled; Mike and Will and Lucas were whipping their heads about trying to keep up.

“No you don’t! You guys always treat me and Billy like total crap – ”

“Yeah, because your brother is a CRAZY PSYCHO!”

“NO, HE’S NOT!”

“Uh, YES HE IS, and so are you right now!”

“GUYS! THIS *DOESN’T MATTER!*” That was Mike.

“Dustin, you’re being a total dick to her right now,” Steve said; Max’s face was bright red.

“Well, maybe that’s because you guys are, are a bunch of liars with mental disorders – ”

“Seriously? Screw you, man,” Steve said.

“OH, DON’T THREATEN ME!” Dustin yelled like an insane person.

Steve’s head was spinning again; there were too many little brats talking. “You know what, I, I can’t deal with this right now, I’m not talking about this with you guys – ”

“That’s great, Steve, no one’s asking you to stay here,” Dust snapped

at him.

“Okay,” Steve said. That was about what was usual anyway. “Okay. Whatever.”

He’d just been standing and holding Billy’s necklace this whole time like a dramatic heroine or something; he stuffed it into his pocket and turned towards the steps. “Sorry, Mike. I really hope you find her.”

Mike just stared at him as he walked past and went up the steps. “Sorry,” he said fadingly too. Steve didn’t answer him.

Outside the streetlamps were on already even though it wasn’t yet nearing dark. It had begun to rain again; Steve stormed over to his car and just stood there for a couple seconds, mind reeling. Too dizzy, kind of felt like he was going to throw up or something. He didn’t even know what he was supposed to flip out about first.

He fumbled about with his jacket. For a moment he thought he’d lost his keys; he was going to have to go back into the Wheelers’ like a total idiot. Then he found them in his jeans pocket too, tangled up in the chain of Bill’s necklace.

Okay. Steve told himself not to freak out on the street. He took his keys and the chain out of his pocket and just stood there, getting rained on and looking at them.

He did actually need to sit down so he got into his car and sat there with the engine off.

He looked at Billy’s pendant. It was some angel or something; Steve never remembered which one it was.

He turned it over a couple times, looking at it. It was this gold pendant but it had a silver chain. Max’d gotten it for Bill for Christmas after his old one had broke and he’d lost it outside at school, fighting someone because he was always fighting someone. Bill had said that it didn’t matter that he’d lost it but it mattered. It’d made Steve feel so bad. He’d gone back to the parking lot at school to look for it; it felt really important that Bill should have his mom’s

pendant back. It had taken him like three hours to find it out in the snow and he hadn't even really thought he could find it. Now Billy never took it off. Steve had –

Holy crap. It made no sense. Not the stupid pendant but everything he'd just heard from Mike. It made no sense, actually it made him feel really crazy. Even if it was a joke or something there was no way that Bill would ever let Mike get ahold of his necklace. There was this huge pressure behind his eyes like the worst headache ever coming.

Bill would never do something to the kid or let someone do something to the kid, to Eleven. Steve knew that. He'd never take her someplace she didn't want to go. So he had to be ... they had to be ... if they were ... God. Where the hell *was* he? Maybe he was hurt or something; he had to be. Hurt or worse.

It didn't make any sense. It was *Billy* – he never got hurt. Or he kind of always was. Back in February Bill's dad had kicked the total shit out of him over Max and Lucas; later Steve'd thought he was gonna die on the phone or something. He'd never wanted to be with someone so bad and Bill had said *Can you just talk to me*. Then the next day he was just in the diner with Max, eatin' french fries with two black eyes and his face all busted up like nothing had even happened. In his head, Steve heard Mike saying *I think she was really scared for him*. Not of him but for him. Jesus. Okay, so they were –

“Steve! Hang on!”

He looked up and Max was running across the lawn towards him all out of breath; she'd probably screamed her head off some more back inside the house. She went over to the passenger side and collapsed into the car next to him. She huffed away from a few seconds. “I thought you left already.”

“Nope. Still here,” Steve said mutedly.

Max turned and stared at him. Steve wasn't sure how long he'd just been sitting there like a moron. It was raining much harder now and she was soaked through; her green t-shirt clung to her shoulders. She pushed her hair away from her face, looking at him. “Dustin and Lucas are total *assholes*, I can't believe they said that – that crap to

you.”

“Yeah, that’s okay.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m really sorry,” she said in a small voice. “I guess I – shouldn’t have told them. I’m sorry. I just wanted everyone to know everything. Billy says I can’t watch my mouth.”

“Me either.” He felt totally blank – he wasn’t mad at her or anything. They’d have found out sooner or later. The thing was that there wasn’t anything to know anymore, he guessed. He didn’t want to think about that right now.

“Dustin’s being a total jerk, I don’t think he meant that stuff. He was just surprised.”

Steve wanted to laugh. He had no clue how he could want to laugh. “Yeah, that doesn’t really matter right now.”

Max looked small and hurt. “Do you think El and Billy are dead?” she asked him out of nowhere.

“No, I don’t – “ God. Steve rubbed his face. “I don’t think so. Of, of course not.”

“Why would they go somewhere together?”

“I don’t know, Max.” She had so many questions for him; he didn’t have any answers. “Maybe they – I don’t know, maybe he was giving her a, a ride somewhere. Maybe they – I don’t know.” He looked out at the gray street. “Hey, look, you should probably go back in there, at least one of us should know what’s going on – “

“No one knows what’s going on *anyway*.”

“Yeah, but you should go be with your friends – “

“No way, I’m staying with you!” Max said loudly; Steve actually felt really emotional. Then she said, “You’re my ride,” and he felt less emotional.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Max looked at him out of the corners of her eyes. Her mouth made a funny shape. "That was a joke, Steve."

"Thanks, I know that," Steve lied.

She clicked her seatbelt on and then they just sat there. "What are we supposed to do?"

"I don't know," Steve said, his standard reply. He wished he knew what to do. He wished he knew where to go. "Do you wanna go and look for him or something?"

Her eyes welled up and Steve felt terrible again. The wrong thing to say. He thought maybe she'd have some idea of what to do, something she'd wanted to do that'd made her follow him out here. He felt totally helpless. "How are we supposed to know where to look."

"I know, okay. Sor – "

"The guys said they already looked everywhere, Billy's not exactly hard to miss!"

"Yep, definitely know that," Steve said. "You want me to take you home? You can go with your mom to the police."

"I guess," Max said tonelessly; she bristled when he glanced over at her. "*What?* What am I going to tell them? Oh, Billy got abducted with our – our telekinetic friend, she's also the chief's daughter but you're not really supposed to know that, here's his license plate?" She looked about to cry again all of a sudden. "I DON'T EVEN KNOW HIS LICENSE PLATE," she yelled out all crazy.

"Max, your mom knows his plate number," Steve told her. "Hopper'll know what to do."

"*How?*"

Steve didn't know. He probably shouldn't say that again. He reached out and turned the key in the ignition, put his headlights on. "I don't – look, Mike said he saw El, I'm sure she'll – I mean, she's gotta be able to talk to Hopper too, right?"

Max shrugged. "Billy says that El and Hop just fight all the time and call each other names."

"So what? He still cares about her."

She just gave him a big pointed look that Steve didn't understand. He turned his attention back to the road and took them down the street.

Mrs. Mayfield's Explorer wasn't in the driveway but Bill's dad's crappy old Ford was. Steve pulled his car over to the curb and they stared at the dark house; it looked all ominous, like a mini Amityville house or something.

Max fiddled with her seatbelt. "Do I have to go in?"

"Uh ... no. You can hang out with me if you want." Bill'd totally murder him if he knew Steve had just dropped Max off with his crazy dad.

"Okay." She was just looking at him again. "What should we do?"

"Yeah, I don't know. You have any ideas?" Max was smarter than him; she might know where to go. She just shrugged though. "Okay, uh, God. You wanna eat or something? You want to get some food?"

"I don't have any money."

"I didn't think that was an issue for you," Steve told her; she almost smiled at him. "I'll get you dinner. Where do you want to go?"

Another moody little shrug. "I don't know."

Great. Steve wasn't that good at making plans; he guessed he was really boring. He'd always just gone along with what his parents wanted him to do, what Tommy and Carol wanted to do. Always tried to figure out what Nancy wanted him to do. What was expected of him. When he'd asked Billy out on a date the other month he'd thought for like four days about something fun that they could do.

Anyway he didn't need to be thinking about that stuff right now; he

was just feeling sorry for himself. He and Max were just going to eat – it was just Max – so it wasn't like it was big thing. How could it not be a big thing when her brother was *missing*.

He drove them back down to Main Street. They ended up at the diner and then Steve thought maybe he shouldn't have taken her to the diner. They were always there with Bill and the rest of the Monster Squad.

Max looked like such a little kid again in her wet Marvin the Martian t-shirt. Her red hair had dried in strange waves against her shoulders. She was always trying to curl her hair – turns out all she needed was some rain and a little trauma.

He shouldn't be being funny in his head right now. He felt like laughing; he was going to go totally nuts. He didn't know what to *do*.

Max stared listlessly at their waitress so Steve ordered her some cheese fries. Then he didn't know what to say to her. It felt like they should be doing so much more; he didn't know what the fuck to do. They sat there in silence until their waitress came back over and Steve said thanks, then he turned back to Max.

“Do, uh, you want your brother's necklace?”

She shrugged. She was pushing her food around on its plate; Steve wasn't hungry either. “You can just give it to him when he gets back,” she said.

“I dunno if he's gonna want that.”

“He will.” She snapped a french fry in half.

Steve didn't know how she could be so sure. “Yeah, I, I don't know.”

“He *loves* you,” Max said simply. Her voice was pitched low for once; there were a lot of people around for a Tuesday night.

Steve felt like laughing hysterically again. He was going to laugh himself out of the diner and right into the street and then be sick on the street. She needed to stop saying that junk.

She looked up at him suddenly; her blue eyes startled him. “He told me about all the stupid stuff he said to you, he didn’t really mean it.”

Steve *really* didn’t want to talk about that right now; he didn’t want to think about it. *He loves you.* He showed it so well. God. God. “Yeah, I don’t know,” he said again. Billy had had to mean some of it to be thinkin’ it.

“And we *don’t* talk about you!” Max told him all impassioned. “I mean – okay, but just – good stuff! I didn’t say that all *dumb crap* he said.” She made a face and snapped another french fry; she was gettin’ her hands all greasy. She mumbled, “I don’t know why he said that.”

Steve didn’t know either. “He was pissed off.”

“So what?” Max rested her chin on the tabletop pulled her soda in front of herself like a weird person. She looked at him through her ginger ale. “It was still crappy.”

“Oh yeah? I thought you were, uh, on his side.”

“I *am!*” she said hotly. “It doesn’t mean it still wasn’t crappy. Why, because his dad might find out or something? He only has to stay home for like another *week*.”

Steve didn’t answer her for a couple seconds. “Yeah, Max, I dunno.”

He knew that Bill was scared about his dad finding out about them. He basically lived to piss his father off but he didn’t want to piss him off that much; Steve got it. His own dad would flip his lid if he ever found out that Steve was messing around with a guy or even thinking about a guy – that wasn’t in Dad’s five-year plan for him.

If he was ever even home to find out, that was. He’d lied to Billy before – his dad didn’t just have an extra office out in Columbus near his job. He had an apartment there too.

The thing was that Bill’d never wanted to tell Max about him and Steve either, not anyone, not just his dad. Sometimes Steve was thinking that maybe it wasn’t being with a guy that Billy didn’t want people to know about. Maybe it was just being with Steve that he

wanted to hide.

He was always trying to tell himself not to push Billy too much. Bill had said before that he wasn't messing around with anyone else but maybe it didn't mean the same thing to him. They never talked about it. Billy liked to hang around with him a lot; he thought that Steve was funny even if he wouldn't say it and he liked to hook up a lot which meant he was pretty much perfect in Steve's eyes. They always had stuff to talk about (sports, the bad music Bill liked, how fucking annoying everyone was) and if he wanted Steve he'd just grab him. It wasn't like being with a girl where you had to go through all these steps with every time. Bill was always hard before Steve even touched him; he'd never been with someone who'd just grab you and say *I want you, come over here*.

But it might – not mean the same thing to him. Billy'd told Steve plenty of times that they weren't fucking boyfriends so Steve didn't know what he wanted. He might not want to be ... exclusive or whatever. He might just be waiting around for someone better. Steve didn't think that all the time but sometimes he thought it.

Max was still looking at him through her soda. "He feels really bad. He was waiting all week to talk to you."

He leaned over and took some of her fries. "Yeah, was he? I heard he was just going to a lot of parties."

Max rolled her eyes; Steve wasn't sure if it was at him. "I know, he's such a moron. That's just what he does. Billy could, like, get his face bashed in and still want to go to a stupid party."

"Yeah, I, I guess."

"I remember when he was going out with – " she hesitated; Steve already knew what she was going to say.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna cry. I know he had a girlfriend before."

"Tracey was the *best*," Max told him. "She was my best friend." Steve didn't know what to say to that – *sorry for the downgrade*? "Whenever they'd have a stupid fight, Billy'd go and get totally loaded for like

three days and be a huge asshole until he finally apologized.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t like doing that.”

“I know. But he said he would.” She finally sat up and pushed her soda away. She was frowning again. “Unless he – just took off with El. But he *told* me he was going to see you. I don’t know why he didn’t.” She looked just like Dustin had, lost and put-out.

“Look, he didn’t just go off with her, okay?” Steve told her. He’d had all day and a night to think about it now and he was almost sure that Max’d been right yesterday. He told her this now. There wasn’t anything else it could be. “I think he was at my place on Saturday. I – heard his dumb car or whatever.”

Her mouth made a weird shape. “Wait, you *saw* him?”

“No, I didn’t – it, it was after we went inside. Thought he was pulling up or something, guess he was taking off.”

Max just frowned and didn’t say anything. She didn’t start screaming that Steve was a huge cheater again and he was glad for it; he really couldn’t handle that right now. “You really think he saw you guys?”

“I guess so.” She didn’t say anything. “Look, I dunno what you think, okay? It’s not like I meant for him to see that shit with Nancy.”

She just shrugged again, a little hitch of her shoulders. “He said you probably wouldn’t want to talk to him anyway. But he wanted to say sorry.”

“I – “ He didn’t know what to say again.

“So do you think he, what, got mad and just took off with Eleven?”

“Max, I don’t know.” He still didn’t understand why Bill would be out with the kid. Steve couldn’t see him going to the chief’s house and getting her or something; he was not that stupid. Why would he go to her and not Max? Why wouldn’t he have came home on Saturday? It didn’t make any sense. “Sorry, I just – yeah, I don’t want to say anything, I don’t know – ”

"You never know anything," Max said dismissively. Her voice got smaller. "He could have came and got *me*," she said which had just been what Steve was thinking.

"Yeah, I dunno why he didn't do that."

"Because you're both totally stupid," she informed him. "You could have just *told* me! If I knew about you guys before, you probably wouldn't have even had this dumb fight."

She was probably right. He knew he'd just thought about how he hadn't wanted to push Bill but he could have pushed him a little. He should have made him tell Max; it hadn't seemed that important. Maybe it'd been a little funny to him too. "Hey, I'm sorry."

"Doesn't really matter anymore." She finally started drinking her soda; she wasn't looking at him anymore.

They stayed at the diner for a long time. Neither of them knew what to do and neither of them wanted to go home. Finally Steve had to take her home though. Max had a nine o'clock curfew and she said she'd catch the shit from her mom if she was late. When he pulled up in front of her house again Susan's car was finally back and there were lights on in the kitchen and living room so Steve felt okay dropping her off.

"Sorry, don't know if I can get you tomorrow."

Max was taking her seatbelt off and opening up the car door. "That's okay," she said. "I know you have to work."

"Lemme know if you hear something, tell me what your mom says."

"Okay. I will." She climbed out of the car and stared at him. "Sorry ... sorry about the guys again."

"Yeah, that's okay."

"Thanks for the ride, too. I mean it."

"Yep, sure." He watched her walk up to the house and go in. He had this hollow feeling, like he was an empty shell that was filling up

with panic. He didn't know what he was supposed to do so he went home too.

Back at his house no one was around either and he felt thankful for once. He didn't think he could deal with his mom right now.

Steve went inside; he let Luke and Leia in from out back. They were still acting kind of down and he wondered if they missed Billy too. He gave them two extra treats and let them lay on the couches even though his mom would scream later. They looked like a postcard or a picture from an animal calendar laying on each other all cute on the couch. He patted them for a while and went upstairs to his room. Then he got to lay around and feel like shit about everything.

He felt really horrible. Bill and El were missing and he was just sitting (laying) around. He didn't know what he was supposed to do or where he was supposed to go. It felt like he should be out doing something, maybe looking for them. He should have told the kids to fuck off earlier and stayed at Mike's – he should have made Max go back in with them. He had no clue what they were supposed to do.

He was too stupid and he *missed* Billy, too. He hadn't really let himself miss Bill yet – he'd been trying to just stay angry. If it was a normal Tuesday and his mom was out Billy would probably be here with him.

Nothing was normal anymore. It hadn't been for a long time he guessed.

He felt really horrible about everything else that had happened today too; he hadn't expected Dustin to act like that. Steve guessed he – hadn't really expected him to act any sort of way. He'd never really given it much thought but probably he should have. He was too stupid. He'd always been telling himself that people could either deal with him and Billy or they wouldn't; he hadn't really considered Dustin or the rest of the kids *not* dealing with it.

They *were* supposed to be friends, him and Dust, and that's why he felt so low. Dustin's mom had told Steve before that Dustin looked up to him, not that you'd be able to tell by the way he ripped into Steve on a daily basis. Last Christmas he hadn't even gone skiing with his

parents and he'd gone over to Dustin's house. It'd been Dustin's fifth year since his dad had been gone and it was harder now that he was a teenager, Steve figured. They'd just ended up at the Wheelers' house anyway and it had made Steve feel so great to be there with Nancy and Jonathan all aglow together and Mrs. Wheeler talkin' too much to him, trying to act like it was cool that Nance had thrown him over. Dustin had given him a pep talk in the basement (not that he had needed it) and told him he was totally too cool to date someone like Nancy anyway.

It just made him feel really low; they definitely hadn't had any pep talks in Mike's basement today. Sure he could see Dust being hurt or even pissed because Steve hadn't told him about Bill but he hadn't expected him to actually get mean. Steve knew he could have been meaner but he hadn't expected Dustin to say that he was crazy or a fairy or that he probably had a mental disease or whatever.

It really sucked. He was trying hard not to worry about Bill or where he could be. He laid in bed for a long time feeling bad for himself instead. Dustin was a real smart kid; Steve'd kind of thought he'd be more open-minded.

He didn't think he was crazy. He didn't think he had a mental disorder either just because he felt a certain way about a guy. It didn't make you a fairy. There were way worse things than wanting to be with someone who was the same sex or whatever that you were. He'd *seen* crazier things right here in Hawkins. Inter-dimensional monsters, Nancy Wheeler cocking a loaded gun in his face. Hopper in that horrible hat last month. He felt bad but he still didn't think it was *wrong* or anything. He wasn't going to let it be wrong.

Being with Billy was the only thing that Steve had ever wanted that he wasn't really supposed to want. It wasn't something he'd just gone along with because he was supposed to. Not something his parents wanted or to make his friends happy. Billy was just for him and Billy was *his* even if maybe he didn't want to be. That mattered. Even if it meant something different than what Steve'd thought it still mattered. Just because they'd had a fight or whatever or broken up or Bill didn't really want him it still mattered. You couldn't take that away.

He laid in bed for a long time. He kept hearing Max in his head saying *He was going to say he loves you* and *He left, or something happened*. Something happened. Something happened. It took him forever to fall asleep.

He woke up feeling suffocated and kind of panicked; his head hurt. He thought that sometimes he forgot to breathe when he was asleep or something.

The room was too dark; the weight of it felt like it was choking him. He'd forgot to open up his window – he should get a fan or something. It felt like he was stuck down in those caves with the kids again or something and the dark air was going to swallow him up.

He turned the light on by his bed and put his stupid glasses on. He thought he'd been having a dream about Billy but he couldn't really remember it; he usually never remembered his dreams unless they were especially horrible or something. Sometimes they did get pretty horrible.

Steve sat up and tried to remember his dream. Normal person dream or a freaky dream? Probably a normal-person dream; it wasn't like he and Bill had some kinda psychic connection like Eleven did with people or whatever. According to Billy he and Steve didn't have any kind of connection anyway.

Okay he needed to stop doing that. It didn't feel right to feel mad or self-righteous right now if Bill was actually in trouble. If – shit – *when*, when he got back, then Steve could go back to being pissed or they could talk it out or whatever they decided to do.

He didn't really feel that mad anymore, anyway. Mostly he just felt sad and a little hurt and a lot worried.

He looked over at the clock beside his bed; the red numbering told him it was past one in the morning which was great. He'd only been

passed out for less than an hour and he didn't see himself falling asleep again any time soon. Could you even have a dream in less than an hour?

He felt like total crap and he felt freaked out like he always did when he woke up suddenly; he didn't know why he had to get like this. He felt like a huge baby. Last year after all the shit with the kids and the monsters (Dustin had got him saying Demodogs but he hated saying Demodogs) had happened he'd had nightmares all the time and he'd felt like a huge crazy baby; it wasn't like he could tell anyone about it. All the kids seemed fine and Nancy was fine so Steve should be fine.

It'd gotten to the point where he never wanted to sleep. He'd get up at like five in the morning and sit around or walk the dogs or drive around. After he'd become actual friends with Billy he'd ended up at Bill's and Max's place on a lot of Saturday and Sunday mornings. They didn't mind him being there as long as he didn't talk through the morning cartoons.

If it was a normal Tuesday – Wednesday now – he'd probably have Bill here with him; he'd been staying over some nights. Steve didn't really have nightmares anymore but when he'd wake up Bill was usual awake too and he'd roll on Steve and mumble some dirty stuff and then they'd probably hook up. Sometimes they just talked too which was nice too, not really about anything.

It made him feel really lonely and stupid; he missed Bill. It wasn't like they'd been doing this for that long and he didn't know how you could really miss something you'd only had for like a month or so. It actually almost physically hurt in a weird way, the missing thing, like it made his stomach hurt or something. How he'd felt hurt all week. Maybe he was finally getting that stupid flu bug all the brats had had last month.

He got up and put his jeans on and went downstairs in the hopes of feeling less sick. Mom still wasn't home and it all dark downstairs; Luke and Leia were crashed out in the kitchen now and they came trotting out to bump into him when he went down the stairs. He turned some lights on and sat in the living room feeling nuts.

The long dark night stretched out in front of him; he could already tell he wasn't going to get back to sleep and he didn't know what to do. Nights were the worst.

He felt too crazy and like he should be doing something. He was just sitting around like a total asshole and Billy was missing or fucked up somewhere or hurt somewhere or stuck somewhere like Mike had been going on about. Steve should be out doing something.

He didn't know what he was supposed to do, though. What was he supposed to do, run out swinging his bat like a lunatic and go rescue them? That was a pipe dream; that was totally stupid, even for him. He wouldn't know where to go or where to look. He couldn't even help Bill get away from his loser dad. Billy never let anyone help him.

Steve hadn't helped him; he'd punched him in the face. Billy'd been acting like a total douchebag and he needed to get shut down but Steve didn't think he'd really needed to punch him.

Now he was thinking about Max looking at him and saying *Do you think El and Billy are dead?* and that made him feel too crazy too. He didn't think they were dead but they really could be dead. The last thing Bill'd ever remember about Steve was that he'd punched him and then kissed Nancy.

He felt like a total asshole; he was going to go nuts if he stayed here. He edged his sneakers on and wandered outside.

He stood on his front steps smoking a cigarette and looking at the one lone light on down the street at the Howards' place. He thought he'd go to his car but he walked past that; he was probably too screwed up or stressed out to drive. It was humid out from the rain earlier and the sky was a thick black blanket above him, no stars.

Steve stood out on his front walkway for a few moments, hands jammed into his jeans pockets, looking up at the sky. They could be anywhere.

Then he was heading out across his yard; he guessed he was taking a walk. Sometimes it was nice to do that. Maybe not at two am when

even the trees looked kinda freaky and your not-boyfriend was fucking missing.

He turned down the end of his street, Fairview, and walked up the long winding sidestreet that'd take you up to the main drag. It took a while but it didn't feel like a while.

Main Street was mostly dark too but there were some lights on. He felt a little more normal even though there wasn't anything normal about walking around Hawkins by yourself at close to two in the morning. He hadn't even brought Luke and Leia so he probably looked like a total freak or a drunk.

There was a dive bar off of Redwood that was open all the time and the lights in the arcade were always flashing. The diner was open too; Hathaways was the only twenty-four hour restaurant they had in town so Steve guessed that was where he was going even if he still didn't feel like eating.

Hopper's police Jeep was one of only two other cars in the parking lot and the engine was still ticking. Steve stood there looking at it for a while and then he went on into the diner.

The bell chimed when he went in; their same waitress from earlier when he'd been here with Max looked up and smiled at him. She was a nice lady and she was always always working. Sometimes Steve wondered if she had a twin or something,

There was an older couple sitting up front at the counter. The rest of the joint was empty aside from Hop who was sitting by himself in a booth in the back; Steve hesitated and walked over. His sneakers sounded loud against the bright linoleum.

Hop looked up before he could speak. "Hey kid," he said. He didn't even look annoyed like he usually did. It was strange to see him out of his police uniform.

"Hey."

"What are you doing here?"

"Uh," Steve said. He didn't really think that Hopper wanted to hear

about his night terrors. "I took a walk. What are you doing here?"

Okay now he looked a little annoyed. "What do you think I'm doing here?" he asked. He had a cup of coffee on the table, sitting untouched.

"Uh – I just – can I sit with you – ?" Hop didn't answer so Steve sat down anyway. "Are you – did you hear anything? Did you talk to Mike?"

"Yeah. I talked to him."

"So you – didn't find her yet?"

Hopper just looked at him and didn't answer again; Steve guessed that had been a pretty stupid question. "Should you, uh, be here right now?"

"Where the *fuck* do you want me to be?" Hopper asked him; Steve stared. "Do you know something I don't?"

"No, I – "

"Because if you have any idea about where I should go or where I should look, by all means, if you think you know better, I'm really open to any suggestions right now." He sounded mean but he didn't look mean; he looked tired and lost too. He had a lot more wrinkles on his face now than when he'd given some speech at the high school four years ago.

"Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to sound like you don't know what you're doin'."

"Yeah, well. I don't know what I'm doing."

Steve leaned over on the table. "Mike told me he found – he got El's bracelet, did he give that to you?"

"Yeah. I got it."

"I, uh, I was at his place earlier – "

"Yeah, said he had a present for you too." Hopper tapped at the rim of the coffee cup. "Kinda looks like my girl and your boy pulled a Bonnie and Clyde."

Steve stared. Then he stared some more.

He felt the blank panic again; he hadn't really thought about that part in any kind of way aside from being worried about the two of them. He knew that Billy wouldn't take the kid and *Max* knew that and maybe even the rest of the kids knew but maybe Hopper didn't know that; Max and Billy's parents wouldn't know that. Billy was nineteen and if he and El had really gone off together that was kidnapping. If he wasn't dead he could go to jail.

"Uh, look," he said in the blank panic. "I don't know what you – I just, listen, Bill wouldn't – he wouldn't, like, take her or something. He wouldn't do that. I mean he wouldn't make her go with him. I know him. I just – "

"Harrington. Calm down." Hopper was pinching the bridge of his nose like he had a huge migraine. "Look, I know that, okay?"

Steve stared again. "Uh – you do?"

"Yeah, your boytoy's not exactly my favorite person, I don't think he's a kidnapper though," Hop said; Steve stared at him calling Billy his *boytoy*. "I mean, I really don't think he's stupid enough to take off with *my* fuckin' kid."

"Uh. I just – "

"Obviously I wasn't in the office today, I got a call from one of my deputies, said your boy's stepmom was there fillin' out a missing-person's for him. She was real worried."

"Yeah, it, it doesn't make any sense," Steve said. "He's been gone since Saturday, I don't know how they could be together, I mean, him and El." Hop just stared at him and didn't speak. "Uh, Mike said she was gone on Sunday, so – "

Hopper interrupted him with a loud sigh; he pulled his coffee towards himself finally and gazed down into it. He opened up a sugar

packet and poured it in. Steve looked at him and waited.

“No, that’s not it,” Hop said finally.

“Uh – sorry? I don’t get you.”

“She didn’t leave on Sunday.”

Their waitress was coming over – Steve was pretty sure her name was Lisa or something – but Hopper waved her away with a hand.

He was still staring at his coffee. He waited until maybe-Lisa went on back to the counter. He said, “Look, Mike was freaked out enough already, I didn’t want to make him – okay, every month I gotta go to a police conference. Kid’s pretty self-sufficient. Stays with the Byers sometimes, but that’s about impossible half the time since that whole family works about a hundred-twenty hours a week now between ‘em all – “

“You let El stay by herself?” Steve interrupted; Hop looked up at him sharply.

“What exactly would you have me do with her?” he asked. “She gonna stay with her little boyfriend? She gonna stay with *your* little boyfriend, both of your attentive families? Maybe she can watch your boy get slapped around by his old man.”

Okay Hopper knew way too much about everything. He hadn’t really believed Bill when he’d said that the chief knew about them; he was making it pretty fucking clear. Also Billy wasn’t little. “Okay, sorry. I wasn’t – “

“I came home Sunday morning, she was already gone. Left me this fucking note, took her backpack. Thinks she’s dangerous. She said she doesn’t want anyone to get *hurt*.”

“I – “ Steve didn’t know what to say to that. “So you think she left on Saturday too?”

“Could have been.” Hopper was drinking his coffee. “I figured maybe she’d go to her mom’s place again, you remember, if she really took off. I’ve been all over Marion County today. Now I’m running your

boy's plates.”

Hopper kept calling him that and not saying Billy's name. “Look, he wouldn't take her – I mean maybe he would, but he wouldn't have, like, run off with her – “

“I said I know that.” He was giving Steve a weird look. “Can't figure it out though. You weren't with him? Thought Saturday was your special day.”

Jesus. “Look, you don't have to be a dick to me about – “ Now he was giving Steve a look that said he was going to get himself thrown in the drunk tank. “I – uh, we got in a fight.” Again he didn't think Hopper wanted all the details. “I heard his car on Saturday, he didn't come in.”

“Okay.” He didn't say anything else.

“So? What are you thinking?”

“I'm thinking you just gave me another puzzle piece,” Hopper told him.

“You think they went somewhere?”

“Maybe.” He didn't say anything for a while again. “You really wanna know what I think?”

“I – yeah, obviously, I have no clue what the fu – “

“Okay, yeah, I'm thinking they went somewhere together. Hang on – “ he held a hand up when Steve opened his mouth. “I didn't say he *snatched her*, Jesus. I'm thinking maybe he picked her up somewhere, maybe he seen her. Or she went over to his work, she likes doing that, huh?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay. So I'm thinking maybe she got in his fancy car with him and they went off somewhere. And I'm thinkin' maybe somebody else ... took them.”

This felt like some kinda nightmare he'd be having; Steve wondered if maybe he was still asleep in his bed. He leaned forward in the booth. "The government?"

"No. Maybe. I don't think so. I know people, she's not ... listed as a priority."

"So, what, just some psycho?"

"I don't *know*. No. There's ... " He stopped.

"What?" Steve said. "Who? I, I don't – "

"You 'member back last month when she was at your house?"

"Yeah, unfortunately."

"Okay, you remember all the crazy shit she was saying?"

El didn't say too much but when she did it was usually crazy shit. "Sure."

Hopper didn't say anything for a while again; Steve watched as he drank his coffee, drained the cup. Then he just stared at it. He said, "This is my fault."

Steve didn't know what to say so for once he managed not to say anything. "This is my fault," the chief said again.

"Uh, I don't – "

"Look, I'm gonna tell you some things, I need you to not start screamin' like you always do."

"All right," Steve said. He'd been in Hopper's presence maybe a grand total of six times; he'd only screamed *once*. Okay maybe two times. "I don't know if this is, like, funny to you – "

"There's this guy who was in charge of the program she was in," Hopper talked over him. "If you want to call him a guy, I'd call him a fucking monster. Martin Brenner. I hadn't gotten the chance to run across him. He's the one who fried her mom, he took care of her.

That's her *papa*."

Steve stared blankly at him. He knew about that because the kids were always talking about it – El was always talking about it. *Papa's looking for me*. It was her post-stress disorder thing. She said it all the time; she'd said it at his house the other week. "So, okay, so it is the government."

"No, it's not. Brenner's been listed as a missing person for two and a half years. You heard us at your house, she – apparently as the story goes, she sent him *away*."

"Uh, right," Steve said. "To the Upside Down."

Hopper looked pained. "Yeah, sure, to the Upside Down. I thought he was dead, maybe the team covered it up."

"So you think he – he's still working for them?"

That was bad, that was really bad. If the government had files on a bunch of Steve's family members that he hadn't even met they could know everything about Billy and Max real easy. They were probably doing experiments on Bill right now to try and figure out why he was such an asshole. They could do whatever they want. They could hurt him or kill him; they could hurt Eleven. Oh my god they were probably –

"Harrington." Hop snapped his fingers in front of Steve's face; he guessed he probably looked some kind of way. "Look, I don't know," Hopper told him again. He didn't know anything either. "There's nothing on this guy. Bank account's untouched, house is gone. He's just gone. I was looking into him, for a while. But I ... " He stopped again. "This is my fault," he said for the third time. "She's been saying all this shit for a while, I just thought – I didn't listen to her. I thought there was no way. And it's been so long. I got sloppy, I started thinkin' she was safe."

Steve didn't know what to say again. He felt the strange empty feeling away; it was like every nightmare. He'd told Billy he shouldn't get too involved with the kid, and now they were – "So you think, what, you think they're okay?"

"I don't know. I'll know more if I get a hit on Hargrove's car."

"Yeah, but I – " He stopped, started again. "I mean, what, that's it? I mean, you can't do anything else?"

"What the hell do you think I've been *doing*?" Hopper asked him.

"Okay, well, can I – can I do something? I want to help," Steve said. "I can – uh, help you look or something, I can go with you – "

"Yeah, no, that's not happening."

"Look, I can't just keep *fucking* sitting here," Steve told him. He was leaned over the table with his head in his hands. "I need to do something – "

"What are you going to do?" Hopper asked; Steve just stared. "Where you gonna go with me, you have any idea? What do you think you're gonna do?"

"Uh, I don't – "

"What about your job?"

"That, that doesn't matter."

"Jesus." Hopper rubbed his face. "Yeah, you need to let me do this."

"Really doesn't look like you're doing anything right now – "

"You are so lucky that I haven't slept in three days," the chief told him, not sweetly. Steve didn't say anything. "Listen to me. There's nothing you can do right now. There's nothing I can do right now, it's three in the morning. Jesus, you all act like – look, kid, you're a kid. There's nothing you can do."

Steve didn't say anything. He didn't feel like a kid.

"I promise you I am going to get them," Hop said. "I need you to keep the little freaks from killing themselves, can you do that for me? Stay with your boy's sister, okay?"

“I, yeah, I just – “

“I’m going to get them back,” Hop said again. He pushed his coffee cup to the side abruptly; stood up. He leaned over the table and spoke in a low voice. “Listen, I can’t do this with you – I have to get home. I got this old CB radio that I used to call the kid on, back when I was hiding her. I used to – I don’t know. I’ve been recording it, I’m hoping she’ll send me a message.”

“Okay, but you – ”

“Look, if they’re not dead yet, they’re not going to be dead. You need to let me do this the way I need to do this. I got stuff I have to look into, you’re making me tired.”

“Okay,” Steve said. “Okay.”

He thought that Hopper would leave but he just stood there staring at him. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know. No.”

“Come on. I’ll give you a ride home.”

“I – yeah, okay.” Steve got up too.

Work sucked on Wednesday because he hadn’t gotten any sleep after Hop had dropped him back off the night before. He couldn’t focus on anything; he spilled coffee on the savings report Terri had given him to look over and then he spent an hour down in the basement with her helpin’ her make another copy.

He didn’t know why everyone always wanted him to look over their work. He’d said like four times he could barely read; everyone thought he was really funny. Probably they thought if they could get in good with him he’d get his dad to hand out raises or something.

The girls all wanted to go out for lunch because everyone said Wednesday was the worst day (that was a lie; it was definitely Monday). They went to a place down the street and Steve got to watch Craig hit on Joanne for an hour and he got to avoid Linda and her twenty questions. He left as soon as five o'clock hit.

His house was still empty when he got in; he didn't know why he'd thought maybe his mom would have come home. He didn't know what he'd tell her if she asked about anything, what he could tell her. She wouldn't believe him anyway. Or worse, she would believe him – she'd totally flip her shit and probably start packin' the house up so they could move to Michigan or something.

The answering machine in the living room was blinking. Steve sat on the couch with Luke and Leia drooling on him and listened to the messages in a kind of detached way. His mom had called and said she was thinking about him; she said she'd put more money in his bank account. Steve'd told her like a million times not to do that and she still gave him money about once a week. He wasn't a kid anymore; he had his own money. He got paid probably more than he should at work and he didn't have any bills or rent yet. A couple weeks ago Bill had seen one of his checks and went around calling him his sugar daddy for like a week; he made Steve way too flustered.

Okay he really shouldn't be thinking about that either. So Mom had called and Alex had called and left a message; he said no hockey this weekend but maybe the next and to give him a call back. Nancy'd called and asked how he was doing and said to call back too.

Steve called Alex back and said next weekend was okay. He called Max to check in on her; she sounded pretty glum and had no new news to report. Steve told her he'd talked to Hop but that he didn't have any news either. Max knew about freaky science guy already; she said Billy could probably kick his ass.

He called Nancy back and they talked for a while. She knew everything that'd happened yesterday which was so great. She said Dustin was being a huge asshole too; Steve didn't want to talk about that.

"I saw Max today, she was in the hall after school with Will and that,

um, other redheaded girl she always hangs around with? She looked so *sad*, I felt really awful.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Not really. She, you know, flipped me the bird and went on her way.”

Steve smiled and scratched his neck. Nancy kept on talking: “I’m sorry, I don’t even know what to say. Is she okay?”

“Not really.” Steve didn’t know what to say either; he knew that Nancy didn’t really like Billy even if she was being nice about him right now. He felt weird talking about it to her. “Their family’s pretty messed up, Nance. She, uh, she needs Bill.”

“Yeah, I guess I know that,” Nancy said. She said, “I always see him giving her her lunch money, it’s ... kind of cute really. Well then they hit each other for a while.”

Steve didn’t know about the lunch money thing. “Uh, yeah, they like doin’ that.”

“I just don’t know how this could have happened,” Nance said. “I don’t even know how you can be – “

Someone started banging away on the front door and Luke howled; Steve almost fell off the couch. “Hey, hang on for a second.”

He stood up and carried the phone out to the doorway to look out into the front hall. Through the bay window he could see about half of Dustin, sweaty and pounding on the door. “Oh, great.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothin’, Dustin’s just here banging down my front door.”

“Oh, great,” Nancy said too. “What does *he* want?”

“I dunno. Probably wants to tell me about how fucked up I am some more.”

"Steve. He didn't really mean that. He looks up to you." She sounded like Mrs. Henderson.

"Yeah, I don't know about that."

"Okay, I mean, you have to admit, it's kind of a big shock."

"What, you think I shoulda told him?"

"No! I ... can see why you didn't," Nancy said tactfully.

Dustin pounded away on the door some more. "STEVE, LET ME IN! I CAN HEAR YOU TALKING!"

Jesus H. "Sorry, Nance, I gotta go."

"Okay, well, I'll let you know if I hear anything from Mike. Don't let Dustin be too mean to you, all right?"

Now she sounded like his mom. "Bye Nancy."

He went and put the phone away; he took his time heading back over to the door. Dustin hammered away the whole time like a lunatic and he nearly fell over when Steve swung it open. "What do you want?"

"Steve, I need to talk to you, can I come in?" Dust's face was all red; he must have rode his bike over.

"What do you want?" Steve asked him again.

"PLEASE let me come in, I think I got heat stroke coming over here –

"

It'd been about seven seconds and he was already being too annoying. Anyway: "Yeah, you can come in." He stepped aside; Dust hefted his huge backpack and waddled through the doorway. He just stared up at Steve. He did kinda look like he had heatstroke. He had two bright pink spots across his cheekbones and his neck was all red. "What?"

"Hi guys!" Dustin said to Luke and Leia; they looked at him in a disinterested way and loped back into the living room. "Oh, what,

you're mad at me too?"

"Look, man, I don't have time to – "

"STEVE! I need to talk to you, can we sit somewhere before I fall down?"

"I guess." He led Dustin into the kitchen and watched as he collapsed into a chair at the table.

Steve leaned against the counter by the sink and looked at him. "Okay. What?"

"Uh. Hang on." Dustin thunked his backpack onto the table and rifled around in it.

He pulled out a Capri Sun and jammed the straw in it. He started drinking it.

Steve stared at him. Dustin slurped the Capri Sun, gazing back at him. He finished it and set the empty pouch on the table. Steve rubbed at his mouth; Dustin stared at him. He reached slowly into his pack again, still staring, and pulled out another Capri Sun. He –

"Jesus Christ, are you FUCKING serious right now?" Steve yelled at him.

"I'M DEHYDRATED, IT'S EIGHTY-SIX DEGREES OUT AND MY BIKE'S FALLING APART!" Dustin lisped back. "I don't feel that I really deserve a beverage from you right now so I had to – "

"Oh, my god, I'll get you something. You want a water?"

"Okay." Dustin watched as he got a glass out and went to the fridge. "Ice too, please."

"Dustin. I swear to fucking God-- "

"Okay! Sorry! No ice is fine too!"

Steve slid the glass over him. "What do you *want*?"

"I want to apologize for yesterday, my reaction was rash and uncalled for, especially considering the situation. I didn't mean to imply that I was frightened by your homosexual lifestyle."

"Oh, my god," Steve said. "Dustin, I really don't want to talk about –"

"Rebecca screamed at me on the phone for like an hour, she said I was a real shithead to you."

"That's, that's great, you told Rebecca?"

"My woman and I have no secrets between us," Dustin told him solemnly. "Unlike me and you, APPARENTLY."

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't tell you –"

"That's okay, I'm *really* sorry," Dustin said. He brightened and grabbed his backpack. "Hey, listen, I was at the library today with Rebecca. Have you read about the Kinsey scale, it is really interesting."

"Uh, what?"

"Also there are these west African tree frogs that can change their gender, typically when there aren't enough males to populate their species they will change their sex to compensate. Then sometimes the male frogs just try to mate with other guys anyway. Crazy, right? National Geographic did a whole display on them."

"Yeah, that's really great –"

"Also there are gay lions in the zoo in Washington State, they gave them a puppy! There was an article in the paper last year."

Steve was pretty sure he was having another nightmare again. "Dustin, why the hell are you telling me this shit?"

"Well, because homosexuality in nature is a normal thing. I have researched this, that means it's science. So, in the name of science, I want to tell you that I am a hundred percent supportive of you being gay –"

“Okaaaaay.” Steve rubbed his face. “Dustin, look – “

“No, I mean it, you don’t need to be ashamed of what your body tells you to do – “

Yeah. Definitely a nightmare. “Dustin, I’m not gay, okay?”

Dust stared blankly. He was slightly less red. “But ... you’re dating Billy.”

“Yeah, that’s – that’s one guy,” Steve told him. “I still like girls. You can like both, you know.”

Dustin stared some more. “You can?”

“I, I think so.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, I support that too!”

“Great, that’s great. You didn’t have anything else to do but go to the fuckin’ library today?”

“No one knows what’s going on, and I felt really bad,” Dust told him. “Your friendship is important to me, Steve! You’re supposed to be my best friend.”

God, he was going to make him get all emotional. Steve told himself it was just because he hadn’t slept all night. “Okay, Mike and Lucas are your best friends.”

“No, AND you!” Dustin lisped. “You’re like my older best friend who gives really bad advice, because he is dating a man. You’re kind of like a, like my dad! Well, if my dad was gay.”

Okay, he was feeling less emotional. “That’s really creepy, don’t say that again.”

Dustin grinned at him. “Do you forgive me?”

Steve thought about it. “I guess so.”

“Okay. We have to shake hands now.”

“Jesus.” Steve rolled his eyes and shook Dustin’s hand; it was sweaty.

Dust looked at him solemnly. “Would you also like to hug? Platonically!”

“Uh, no. I think I’m good.”

“I think we should hug.”

“No, I really, I’m good.”

“Steve.” He was looking at Steve in a really annoying way; he pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. “Come on.”

“You’re literally the most annoying frickin’ person I’ve ever – “ They hugged platonically; that was sweaty too.

“Okay,” Dustin said. He straightened his shoulders bravely. “Would you like to talk about your relationship with Billy now?”

“Nope!” Steve said right away. “Thanks, I’m good.”

“No, I mean it, I’m here for you, buddy. I would like to know about your love life.” Dust was kind of making a face like he was about to get a tooth pulled at the dentist.

Steve sat at the table. “Uh, I thought Bill was a crazy psycho.”

“He is, that’s why we like him,” Dustin told him. He adjusted his baseball cap on his head. “You know, looking back on it, Rebecca informed me that I had forgotten to include one important variable in my list of what you could be doing all the time.”

“Oh yeah? What was that?”

“Billy’s sexual prowess,” Dustin lisped. Steve wondered if you could have a stroke from your annoying kid friend saying horrible phrases.

“Uhhhhh, yeah, if you could never say those words together again – “

“Steve, if you have to date a guy, I guess at least it’s Billy and not some total nerd – “

This was really too weird; he didn't want to talk about this. "I'm not da – look, I don't feel right talking about this shit with you when, when our friends are missing."

Dustin stared at him. "Steve, our friend has SUPER POWERS. If someone tried to hurt her and Billy, she *probably* exploded them already."

"Man, you saw her. I don't think she can do that anymore."

"But Hopper says he's going to find them. Don't you believe him?"

He looked across the table at Dustin and didn't say anything; it seemed like it was so simple to him.

Steve wished it was so simple. All day he'd been driving himself crazy thinking about all the horrible shit that could be happening to El, to Billy; by now he'd thought up about eighty ways that they could be dead. "This isn't one of your comics, man. This is really serious."

"I *know that*, I'm sorry," Dustin lisped at him. "You must be really worried, Mike is going totally crazy. I didn't think you'd want to talk about this, I wanted to make you feel better."

"Yeah, you kinda can't do that right now."

"I'm really sorry, I should have known about you guys. I'm supposed to be the sensitive one!"

Steve managed not to say anything. He was pretty sure he was making a face.

Dustin pursed his mouth and fiddled with his drinking-glass. He moved over and went to the sink to get more water. "Everything is like so different this year," he said. "It feels like we're all split up now, we didn't even know that El was gone for like a whole day. Everyone's pairing off, you and Billy – "

"Hey, I'm sorry – "

" – me and Rebecca, Max and Lucas. Mike and Eleven. Everyone is

just all wrapped up in what they're doing. Everyone has a girlfriend now, aside from Will." Dust turned the tap off. "Did you know that Stacey Farber asked him out, SHE IS A SOPHOMORE. He turned her down though, no one knows why."

Steve stared at him. He thought about Will and the way he'd always get kind of quiet when the other guys started talking about girls or movie stars they liked. He thought about Will and his very obvious crush on Billy; Steve'd never thought he'd see anyone have a sexual awakening watching Billy Hargrove shovel french fries into his mouth like a fucking monster. His had been a little different,

"Um ... yeah," he said. "I don't think he really has a thing for ... Stacey."

"Why not? She could be totally cool."

"You might wanna, uh, sit down again for this."

Dustin stared at him, too. "What?" he said.

"Yeah, just, uh, sit down for a minute." Dustin sat down. "Look, here's the thing – "

"Oh my god, does he have a secret girlfriend too or something?"

"Uhhh," said Steve. "Haha. I don't really – "

The phone rang; they both turned and stared at it. "You should probably get that," Dust said helpfully.

"Gee, thanks." Steve got up and crossed the kitchen to pick up the line. He didn't feel like talking to anyone anymore but it could be important. "Yeah?"

"Hey. I was hoping you'd be home." It was Hopper.

"What's up, what's going on?"

"This is Jim Hopper," Hop said unnecessarily.

Steve scratched his neck. "Thanks, I know that."

“Just making sure. I wanna talk to you about something.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“Look, I think you ... should meet me somewhere.”

“Uh, what is it? What’s wrong?”

Hopper sounded weird. “I got something I want you to see. You wanna meet me at, uh – “ the line crackled – “I guess the diner again. That okay?”

“I – I guess. I mean, yeah.”

Dustin was leaned over the table looking at him. “Steve, who is it?” Steve waved him away.

“Do you have Maxine with you?” Hopper asked sharply; Steve didn’t know why he was being sharp.

“No, it’s Dustin.”

“Oh. Okay. Yeah, don’t bring him. Half an hour, okay? Eight-thirty?”

“Uh, sure,” Steve said; Hop hung up on him.

Steve stared at the phone for a second and then put it back on the receiver.

“Who were you talking to?” Dustin asked again.

“That was ... Hopper, I gotta talk you home.”

“Okay, did he find Eleven?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Yeah, we’re – we’re going to a private dinner, asshole. No, he said he wants to show me something.”

“What?”

“I don’t *know*,” Steve snapped. “Look, let’s go, okay? I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay, okay.” Dustin was gathering up his Capri Sun pouches.

“Dust, just leave it.” It was eight o’clock already and it was going to take him fifteen or twenty minutes to take Dustin back home. He couldn’t believe it was already evening – he’d either been on the phone with Nancy for longer than he’d thought or talking to Dustin for longer than he’d thought.

Dustin shuffled after him outside to the Beamer and got his bike smushed into the trunk; once they got inside the car it instantly got weird and neither of them knew what to say. Dustin had his huge backpack in his lap and he played idly with one of the straps. “Hey, what were you going to say about Will?”

“Uhhhm,” Steve said. Now that he and Dustin weren’t having some big honesty moment he was thinking that it really wasn’t his business. He probably shouldn’t out the kid like Mike and Max had done to him yesterday. God, he did have a big fucking mouth. “I don’t – uh, remember.”

“Oh. Okay.” Dustin played around with his backpack some more. “So what does Hopper want? I could come with you if you want.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” It probably wasn’t anything good if he hadn’t found El and Billy and he was telling Steve not to bring Dustin along. “I said I’ll tell you, okay?”

“Okay,” Dustin said again. They lapsed back into their awkward silence. Dustin didn’t even move to turn the radio up when Boston came on on POWER 99; Steve wondered if this was how it was gonna go from now on. “Thanks,” Dust said when they finally got to his house. “Hey, call me tomorrow, or just go to Will’s. It’s still D&D night.”

Steve wondered whose idea it was to still do that; they were down a mage. “Yeah, thanks.” He waited until Dust when on inside and then turned his car around.

He felt strangely empty as he drove back to town, like he was on autopilot or something. Going through the motions. He was *really* tired; he didn’t want to do this.

It was past eight-thirty by the time he got to the diner; Hopper was in the same booth in the back waiting for him. He had his uniform on today. He stared at Steve as he walked over and sat down.

“Shit, you almost look like an actual adult,” he said in greeting.

Steve looked down at himself. He hadn’t gotten changed from work yet and he was wearing his cactus tie again. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Hang on,” Hop said; the waitress was coming over. It was a different lady than last night. “Hey, act normal, all right?”

Steve leaned over on the table and put his head in his hands; he was totally normal, just like everything else in Hawkins. He smiled politely and ordered a water. Then he turned back to Hopper. “Okay, what?”

Hopper shifted around in the booth and pulled a file folder out from beside him and put it on the table. “I wanna show you something,” he said slowly. “I thought you should see it.”

He pulled a slip of paper out of the folder and looked at it. “My guys work real fast when I tell ‘em to.”

He slid the paper across the table at Steve; it was a big black-and-white photograph, kind of fuzzy, like a photocopy. It was Billy’s car and it was all smashed up.

Steve stared at it. He was aware of Hop sitting across from him, shifting around in the booth. He stared at the photograph for a couple seconds. Maybe a long time; he didn’t know. He scratched at his eyebrow, looking at it. “Uh, what – where was this?”

No answer. He looked up; Hop was staring at him. “Are you all right?”

“Sure,” Steve said blankly.

“Does that look familiar to you?”

He didn’t really know why Hopper was doing this to him. Obviously

it looked familiar. “Yeah, that’s, uh, that’s Billy’s car,” he said mutedly.

“How do you know?”

Steve looked up again. “What do you mean, how do I know – “

Hopper leaned over and tapped at the photo. “No plates,” he said in a strange voice. “How do you know?”

“Yeah, that’s Bill’s car,” Steve said again. He stared at the picture some more. The hood was all mashed up; the front windshield was blown out. “He’s got, uh. That rip in the front seat.”

Hopper ran his hand through his hair. “Yeah, I thought it was his. ‘79, right?”

“Right,” Steve said, still blankly. “Where did you – guys find it?”

“Pulled it out of the woods offa Route 42, you know that road?”

“Sure,” Steve said. It was a little four-lane highway, two lanes in some parts. It was mostly all forest. He took that way a lot when he went into the city. He and Bill had been on that road before.

“Bout two hours from here. Back’s all smashed up too. Airbags didn’t work.”

Steve looked at the picture some more. His throat felt dry. “Somebody hit him?”

“Looks that way. Guardrail’s bent up about a mile back, I’m thinking he drove into that. Could be from something else.”

“Right,” Steve said. “So ... that,” he said slowly. “Could that kill you?”

“Can’t really say.”

“Great. You’re really, that’s so great – ”

“Look, I wouldn’t think so. Probably better that the airbags didn’t

work; woulda broke my kid's nose."

"Uh-huh." His head hurt. "Why, why are you showing this to me?"

Hop was just looking at him again. "I thought you'd wanna know."

"Uh," Steve said. Everything felt so much worse. "Yeah, I just – uh, I don't –"

"Take a minute," Hop told him. Steve took two.

"How do you even – you don't even know if they were together –"

"Yeah, I do," Hop said; Steve looked up at him sharply.

"I've been asking around. Certain people," he said when Steve opened his mouth. "There's this guy I used to play poker with, he does maintenance over at the general store –"

"Wait, you played poker with Creepy Norman?" Steve asked him. Max was always complaining about that guy.

"He's not creepy, he has a condition," Hopper said patiently. "He takes his break over at the bar just outside of town every day –"

"That's, that's great too –"

"Can I *talk*?"

Steve raised his eyebrows and waited.

"Okay, well, he remembers your boy's car from around town. Real nice color, he said. Always looks at it."

"He painted it after he fixed the engine," Steve muttered. "It was like the first thing he did."

Hopper was staring at him in a weird way; Steve didn't know why. "Yeah, I bet it was."

Steve cleared his throat. He was not going to have a freak out in the middle of the diner. "So what, you told him Bill was missing?"

“Yeah, told him I was lookin’ for him. He said he seen him driving down the state road a little after two, three o’clock. Had a little girl in the car, probably his sister’s friend, right? They were laughin’ together and all.”

“You think they were going to the city?”

“Could be.”

Billy was so fucking stupid. He was so fucking stupid. “I just, uh – “

“Whoever hit ‘em took the plates. Car’s wiped clean, no fingerprints. What’s that say to you?”

“I don’t know.” Hopper sure had a lot of questions for him; he didn’t know why they were doing this. “Someone wanted to dump the car?”

“Looks like it. Not a regular car-jacking, right?”

He was beyond the blank panic feeling; he wasn’t really even in his body anymore. “So you think it’s that guy like you said?”

“Yeah, I think so. Or else somebody like him.”

Steve folded the picture up; he didn’t feel like looking at it anymore. “So what, uh. What’s our next – what do we do now? I mean – “

“We don’t do anything. I said I’m handling it.”

“Right, but I – “

“I don’t know what’s up with you kids and your *we* shit. You’re not junior deputies.”

Steve rubbed his eyebrow. “Why’d you bring me out here for this?” he asked Hopper. “You’re telling me all this shit and then you’re saying I can’t do anyth – “

“I thought I was doing you a courtesy. I don’t have to tell you anything.”

“Great, okay, so you really want me to know tell me that some freak

took El, and that, what, like, Billy's, like, like DEAD somewhere?"

"*Public place*," Hop reminded him like he wasn't in uniform and they weren't sitting and whispering together over a file folder. "Listen, I don't think he's *dead*. I don't think he's dead. Woulda planted the body, been easy."

Jesus. "Okay, so – that's really reassuring – I don't really know what you – "

"I'm working on something." Hop took the folded up paper back and looked at him. "My radio went off last night."

"You heard something?"

"Just static. But it never goes off. So I'm banking on that."

"Oh, so you're just gonna, what – sit around and wait for a frickin' radio signal?"

Hop gave him a look. "No, asshole. I'm gonna go back out there tonight and look around. I just, uh. Thought you'd wanna know what's up."

Steve didn't answer him. They sat there for a while, not talking. The waitress brought over a burger for Hopper; it was so great that he could eat. She asked Steve if he wanted to order and he didn't answer her.

"He's good, thank you," Hop told her. He rubbed his face as she walked away. "Shit," he said. "I haven't really been ... I'm not good at this part. I haven't been over to the house, I have to tell, uh, his family, his mom – "

"Stepmom," Steve said absently. Oh God, Max. Oh God, Billy.

"Yeah. His stepmom. The kid. I think it's gonna be pretty bad."

"I can, uh, I can tell them for you," Steve said. He could do that at least.

"No. No, I gotta go over there, it's proced – "

“Yeah, but I can – tell Max. If you want.”

Hop rubbed his face some more and then ate two french fries; Steve stared at him. “You want to tell her? Yeah, maybe you should tell her.”

“Okay.” He sat up and nearly knocked his water over. “Uh, yeah, so I should go – “

“No. Sit down.” Hop was just eating his burger. “I think you should sit down for a moment. You okay?”

Steve felt like laughing again; his stomach hurt. “Uh, no? No. Nope. Not really.”

“You’re gonna be okay,” Hopper told him. “I don’t want you to drive right now. You should eat my fries.”

“Thanks, I’m good.”

“I got extra crispy.”

“How the *fuck* are you just eating right now, man?” Steve asked him; Hopper raised his eyebrows, chewing.

“It’s brain-power,” he said. “I need to think.”

Deep-fried brain power. He was too hilarious. Steve didn’t say anything.

Hopper kept on eating. He was going pretty fast. “You know, I didn’t have to come here and tell you anything. I thought I should. You’re still okay.” Steve still didn’t say anything; he wasn’t okay. Hopper reached over and took his water. “I’m gonna give you my home number and the station number. I don’t know if I can be reached, I’ve got some people I need to see. But if you hear something or the kids hear something, you call me.”

“What, what would we hear.”

“Harrington, I don’t know. This is a fucking nightmare. Maybe Wheeler’ll have another *dream*.”

Steve looked at the condensation-ring on the table where his glass of water had been before Hop'd taken it. His mind was spinning; it was gonna whirl out of his skull. "Why did she go to Mike and not you?"

"Yeah, why do you *think*?" Hopper asked him. He stuffed the last of his burger into his mouth and chewed it. "Doesn't trust me. Why'd Hargrove run off on you?"

That was really shitty. Steve slumped back in the booth and looked at him coldly. He didn't say anything.

Hopper pursed his lips, looking back. He had big dark rings under his eyes. "Hey, look, I'm sorry. I don't mean to – "

"Whatever," Steve said. He took some fries.

They didn't stay at the diner for much longer. Hopper wanted to head out; he said he wanted to go home and get his guns before he went on the road. He said he was going to stop by Bill's house so Steve went home and called Max up. He didn't even remember the drive home and he just called her without thinking.

Max took the news about as well as he'd expected which was not well at all; Steve thought she'd cried a little. She told him that everything was his fault anyway and then hung upon him so Steve got to lay awake all night and think about that. If he and Bill had never hooked up. If Steve hadn't wanted to meet him in the gym. If he hadn't been sitting outside with Nancy.

But Eleven had still gone off by herself. If she wasn't with Billy, she'd have been all alone. And maybe they – he – *whoever* – would still have taken her. That was bad too. Steve didn't know what he wanted to have happened; he didn't know how to feel about anything.

Max called back in the morning though; he guessed she was getting

ready for school. He leaned against the counter in the kitchen to talk to her and try to put his tie on. He almost strangled himself.

Max said sorry and she didn't mean it, she was just mad. She was so much like Bill it wasn't even funny. Well nothing was funny right now. She told him that she and her mom were getting Bill's car towed to the garage that he worked at. She said that his boss would fix it up for him.

"Hank says it still runs," Max told him.

Steve wrapped the phone cord around his wrist four times. It was early and he didn't know what to say to her. "Do you guys have the money for that?" Stupid.

"Hank said we can owe him," she said in a weird flat tone.

"Oh, okay. But what are you gonna do if – "

"*What?*" Max snapped.

If he doesn't come back. It'd been five days already.

"Nothing, I don't – "

"Well I guess it'll be my car then," she said in the same flat voice. "I get my license in four months, you won't have to worry about driving me around anymore."

"Max, I don't care about driving you – "

"Whatever. Maybe I'll paint Billy's car red, do you think that'd look *nice?*"

"That's really not funny," Steve told her.

"I'm not *being* funny," Max snapped. She was quiet for a moment. "Are you going to go to Will's later?" she asked in a small voice.

"Uh, yeah, if you want me to."

Max didn't say if she wanted him to or not. "Okay, well, we're

meeting at six. I have to go get ready.”

“You need a ride to school?”

“My mom’s taking me,” Max said. He heard the line fuzz over for a second; he could picture her on the little faded couch, messing around with her sneakers or her skateboard. “See you later, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks, Steve,” she said like a weird person. She hung up the phone.

Work was total crap again and Linda told him three times how terrible he looked. She was a real angel. He couldn’t really tell her what was going on; he was tired of lying to people. He left as soon as he could. It was probably the first Thursday in a while that he hadn’t stayed late to help Linda with her paperwork. He hoped she wasn’t too pissed at him.

The brats were all at the Byers’ house already when he got there. Dustin greeted him too enthusiastically; by the looks on Mike’s and Lucas’s faces Steve figured Max’d told them about Bill’s car already.

No one else was being enthusiastic and Steve didn’t even know why they were all together. He guessed they were usually at the Wheelers’ or at the Byers’ house but everything just felt screwed up and wrong. He didn’t know what had happened with Mike being super grounded either but whatever.

Will was at work until eight so it was even weirder that they were all there. He’d started working at the little movie theater in town a couple months ago. He and Bill went to see a crappy horror movie together about every weekend; Steve wondered if he felt better or worse about everything what with being at work.

He certainly didn’t feel any better at work. He’d almost stapled his tie to an order report today.

Mrs. Byers – *oh no, call me Joyce* – wasn’t there either; Mike and Dustin told him that she’d left last night with Hopper and Steve managed not to say anything. It didn’t feel right; maybe he was just being a huge baby again. Joyce was out helping Hopper and Steve

got to sit around like a total asshole and play babysitter like he always did. It was totally fucking stupid.

Joyce and Will weren't home but Jonathan was there for a little while before he left for his job so Steve got to stand around and make stilted small talk with him for a couple minutes. "Really sorry about your friend," Jonathan said; Steve wondered what all he knew about it. They were standing in the Byers' little kitchen and he could hear Dustin and Lucas arguing with each other out in the living room. "When Will was gone I thought I was gonna lose my mind."

Aw, but you had Nancy there for you the whole time, Steve managed not to say. That was so shitty and he didn't need to say that. It was maybe kind of true but he didn't need to say it.

It wasn't that he hated Jonathan or anything, didn't even really dislike him. He hadn't hated Jonathan even when Nance had decided she'd rather date him than Steve. He was just – you know, also one of those people that Steve wouldn't cry over if he decided to take his camera (stupid expensive camera that Steve had broke before) and move to Alaska. The North Pole would be good.

He really didn't need to know everything about Steve and Billy either. "Yeah, I remember," said Steve.

Jonathan was putting dishes away; Steve wondered if he was supposed to offer to help or something. Jonathan held a frying pan against his chest like a weird person. He never looked right at you when he was talking to you. "Billy's a pretty tough guy," he said. "I mean, according to Will." He almost smiled; Steve wondered what else Will said about Billy. "Mom says if someone took him they're probably wishing they hadn't about now."

Steve didn't say anything. He was thinking about Bill's car all smashed up again. Jonathan put his frying pan away in the cabinet.

Back in the living room the kids were arguing over what to do. Mike said that if they had a more powerful radio that they could contact Eleven more easily. Steve didn't really understand why they were always going on about some radio. No one was fucking doing anything.

"We tried that all year when she'd go wandering around, it didn't work," Dustin pointed out.

"Yeah, because she didn't need it then!"

Steve and Max were crashed out on the floor with their backs against the couch, playing the most uninspired game of War on an old deck of cards. Mike told them that Hopper had gotten a hit on his CB last night; a lot more static and then some kind of numbers in morse code.1800.They weren't really sure what it meant or who had sent it. Mike said it had to be El because it couldn't be anyone else.

Max and Steve flipped over their cards; Steve drew a four and Max had seven. She smacked his arm listlessly.

"Ouch," Steve said anyway. "So what is that, like a phone number?"

Mike was across the room stalking back and forth for no reason that Steve could see; he stopped and made his melted-candle face. "No, it's not a phone number, you idiot! *Why* would it be a phone number?"

"Yeah, El wants Hopper to dial a collect call line to find her and Billy, 1-800-HERE-I-AM!" Lucas said. He was too hilarious.

"Okay, you know what – "

"GUYS, I'm gonna need you to lay off!" Dustin lisped in gay solidarity. "Can you not be ASSHOLES for two minutes?"

"Oh my GOD, I wasn't even – "

"I don't know if you've noticed but Steve is going through something right now! He just lost the love of his life! You don't need to – "

Steve's face felt really hot; he was glad it was kinda dark in the room. "Dustin, man, shut the fuck up," he begged; Dustin leaned over and shook his shoulders in solidarity. Max turned over a king and smacked him again.

Mike was once again ignoring Steve's gross love life. "It's obviously an address or something, do you know how long it's going to take

him to look up every street that has that number?” he said. “Just in this STATE? IN THE COUNTY?” He paced even more; he was gonna wear a hole in their rug.

Steve beat Max with a ten and slapped her wrist. “He doesn’t need to look up houses, just business complexes.” Everyone stared at him and he wondered if he’d said something really fucking stupid again. Maybe he’d misheard Mike the other day. “What? You said she was in a, a warehouse or something.” He worked in an industrial complex; it was 900 Wynwood. There was the big office that held two businesses and there was a canning company and a vacuum manufacturer. Hopper probably already knew to check places like that; he probably already had.

Everyone stared at him some more. Mike said, “Oh my god, that actually makes sense.” He ran out of the room like a little nutcase.

“Good job, Steve, you just put your two brain cells to use!” Lucas told him; Steve made a face.

Max picked up their whole deck of cards and threw them in Lucas’s face. Most of them hit. “YOU’RE SUCH AN ASSHOLE!” she roared.

“It was a JOKE!” Lucas picked an ace out of his shirt-collar.

“There’s nothing funny right now, you dick-stick!”

“Max, he didn’t mean it like that,” lisped Dustin.

“*Whatever.*” Max’s face was slowly turning red and Steve was pretty sure that meant she was going to cry. “This is so stupid, WILL’S NOT EVEN HERE!” She turned towards Steve. “I want to go *home.*”

“Okay.”

Lucas was shaking cards out of his hoodie. “Max, come on, you can’t leave. I’m sorry, okay?”

“I don’t care. This is *stupid.*” She stood up in one smooth motion and snatched her red track jacket away from Dustin; he cowered like a little kitten.

“Yeah, but what if Hopper finds something?”

“Gee, I actually have a phone, you guys can use it to *not call me* like you always do!” She stomped on out of the house and left the front door wide open. Everyone stared after her and Steve stood up too.

“Hey – I’m sorry,” Lucas said after a moment, oddly quiet. “It was just a joke. I wasn’t being serious.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should be serious right now.”

“You totally have a normal amount of brain cells, Steve,” Dustin told him still in solidarity.

“Thanks, I don’t care,” Steve said; out on the street Max laid on his horn. “What the – fuck, I know I locked my car.”

“I *hate it* when she does that,” Dustin said. “Do you remember when I took her Walkman?”

Steve ignored him. Apparently Max was an excellent lock pick; he could guess with his two functioning brain cells who she’d picked that up from. “Yeah, I – guess I’ll be back.”

Out in his car Max was having a total meltdown. “YOU NEED BETTER ANTI-THEFT LOCKS,” she screamed at him. “Someone’s going to take your stupid car!”

“Did you seriously break in in two seconds?” Steve asked her; she burst into tears. Oh crap. “Hey, Max, you’re fine.”

“I’m not fine! Nothing is fine!”

“Yeah, but you’re, you’re okay.”

Max scrubbed at her face violently and got herself under control. “This is so stupid, we can’t even do anything! You know my mom thinks Billy just got mugged or something? She even called his uncle out in California.”

“What, uh, what’s his dad say?”

She shrugged. "He left again yesterday morning."

"Oh." That was so great. His kid was missing and he just goes off to work. Even Steve's dad would care if something happened to him.

"Bev and her mom want to get like a search party together or something." Bev was Max's friend from school; she always had cigarettes. "Mrs. Wheeler said she'd help. They don't even know about El. Like Billy's just lost in the woods or something!"

"At least they're doing something." Unlike them. They were just talking in his stupid easy-to-break-into car, again. Max just stared ahead at the dark road and didn't say anything. "What do you wanna do? I can take you home, wherever you want."

She didn't answer for a moment. "Can you take me to the car garage?" she asked in her new small voice. "I want to talk to Hank."

"Uh, okay."

He drove her off back down to Main Street. The shades were drawn down, covering the two big windows of the autobody shop, but there was a light on in the front.

Max undid her seatbelt and hesitated. "Can you wait for me for a minute? I don't know if ... he might just want to go home or something."

"Sure." Max ran on inside and Steve sat out idling in the car.

She came back out a few moments later; she had her hands jammed down in her jacket pockets. She leaned over his window. "Hank's getting me a pizza," she said. "Do you wanna, like, eat with us or something?"

Steve kind of did. He'd only met Hank once or twice but he seemed like an okay guy. Even so it felt too fucking weird to sit around eating dinner with Bill's sister and his boss. "That's okay, I told the guys I'd be back."

"Okay."

"I can pick you up from school tomorrow if you want, I get out early."

"Okay," Max said again. She rolled her eyes. "We can talk about the *search party*."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Okay, see you." He watched her head back on into the shop.

He stayed at the Byers' house until really late; it was past one when he drove the rest of the kids home so that meant he only had to stay home and lay awake a couple hours before he had to go into work. Joanne had one of her nervous breakdowns at eleven-thirty and locked herself in the back office. It took Steve and Linda and Todd over an hour and a half to convince her to come on out and then Steve got to go home.

He picked Max up – just Max today and no Lucas – around three and they went out to Eastgate to get Dairy Queen. Steve had a fridge full of food at home; he needed to stop eating fast food all the time.

Max was in a better mood today and she didn't scream at him or turn red or cry. He could see her trying real hard to act like things were normal; maybe he did know Max a little. He still felt like a total useless asshole but Hopper had told him to stay with Max so he was going to stay with Max.

She ate a lot of food and talked a lot. She said that her mom had called three hospitals last night to see if Bill could be in any of them. She talked about school and her friend Bev a lot; she said that Bev and her boyfriend Ryan Pearson were breaking up and Ryan Pearson'd got her kicked out of study hall twice this week. Bev was the worst person ever, Max told him, she thought Mike wasn't that bad!

"She should probably go to the hospital like right away," Steve said; Max almost smiled at him.

"She said that he's actually cute, he reminds her of her friend Richie from back home."

When he got Max back to her mom's it was past eight; all the lights were on and he watched Max run on into the house. Her mom met her at the door and tugged her into the house.

Steve didn't really need to see the emotional display. When he got back to his house it was eight-thirty.

He let the dogs in from outside and wandered over to the counter in the kitchen. The answering machine was blinking four times which meant he was really popular today. He leaned over to press the play button and the phone rang right as he reached out; Steve about jumped out of his skin. He stared at the line ringing for a moment. He picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Jesus Christ, I been calling you since four o'clock, I thought you got out early on the weekends." It was Hopper; Steve's stomach filed with dread.

"Sorry, I just – "

"Don't worry about it."

The line fuzzed over; Steve could hear a lot of people talking in the background, like Hopper was in a hallway or something. He said, "What's – "

"Didn't you talk to Maxine?"

"I just dropped her off," Steve said. "Why, what's – "

"I found your boy, you wanna come see him?"

Everything froze for a couple seconds, then it unfroze. Hopper said, "Hello? You there?"

Steve said yeah.

4. Chapter Four

Summary for the Chapter:

Mom started coughing too much so he got her a napkin; she wiped her mouth and it came away red. She folded it up like he hadn't seen. *You don't have to stay here, baby. It's Friday night. You should go out and do something fun.* Billy felt this real hopeless feeling looking at her; he felt totally empty. Even years later he didn't know what that was. He *loved* her. Why would he go?

Chapter Four

His arm hurt real bad. His head hurt too.

At first when he woke up he wasn't really sure where he was, couldn't remember. He tried to sit up and his left shoulder burned; the ground was hard underneath him. Stuff started coming back to him in these little flashes, like on a TV program or something.

One second he'd been laughing with the kid in his car, one hand on the wheel and the other on the radio, the next second there was the swell of headlights in his rearview mirror, too-close and too-bright, flood-lights. Whoever had been behind him hadn't had their lights on and they were real close.

Everything happened so fast. Billy's first thought was that it was the chief somehow, coming to kill him for taking off with Elijane. But then the lights grew even brighter still and there was this muted thud, almost a scraping sound, and then his whole car jerked forward *really hard* and he realized they'd actually been hit. Hop wouldn't do that, not with his girl in the car.

Kid's eyes in the mirror, too-bright too. Watched her mouth twist in fear and form his name – *Billy!* – and then whoever was behind them rammed into the back of his car again.

The steering wheel jerked under his hand. He tightened his grip and felt the car skid across the road. For all the screaming and hollering everybody always did about the way he fuckin' drove – Max and Harrington and Susan and even his old man – Billy'd never been in an accident, not even a fender-bender. Blown a tire out once but that hadn't really been anything. The car behind them hit them again and he felt the tires squeal. He slammed on the brakes and the car skidded even more; he remembered you weren't supposed to do that. The car slammed against them a third time and he knew they were going to go off the road.

The thing was that he was too stupid and he didn't realize yet how stupid he was. He thought maybe it was just some prick who wanted to run them off the road; he sped up and they just hit him again. The car skidded again and the wheel yanked wildly under his hands. It wasn't going the way he wanted it to; it was the first time his car hadn't done what he'd wanted it to. They bounced off the curve in the shoulder of the road hard and drove straight through the guardrail. Glass from the windshield exploded everywhere.

The force of the crash knocked all the wind out of him. There was still a big empty blank there. He wasn't sure when the car had stopped moving. He'd hit his head really hard somehow; he'd glared earlier at the kid to put her seatbelt on but he wasn't wearing his.

Everything went kind of grey for a minute and he thought he'd passed out. When he came to and opened his eyes the same song was still playin' on the radio – 'The Sentinel' by Judas Priest – so he couldn't have been out for more than a minute or two. There was glass in his face and in his shoulder and it fucking *hurt*. Air-bags hadn't gone off – Hank always bitched his head off about the model of Billy's car and told him he needed to get that shit taken care of, but Billy was glad for it right now. The air-bags would've smashed up the kid's face; she bled enough.

Everything swam around him and his arm fucking hurt. There was some blood; it was mostly his. Eliane was crying, an awful sound. Billy reached over and unclicked her seatbelt and felt something grind in his shoulder, this flash of white.

His head was too heavy and he thought they should get out of the

car. Cars didn't blow up all the time like on the TV but they should get out of the car. Kid's door was all crushed up so he opened his and got out. He touched her shoulder and pulled her across the passenger side; his hand on her arm felt slick and he was scared he was hurtin' her. Didn't want to do that. Maybe he shouldn't touch her. He shouldn't touch anyone at all really.

Elijane was crying and holding her jaw; he'd remember later that she looked all of six years old. He pulled her out of the car and she tumbled against him. He thought she'd bumped her face pretty bad. Touched her hand and her face and then there was blood on that too; he thought that was his blood so that was okay. Everything felt like it was spinning and he tried to keep looking at her. "You okay?"

She didn't say she was okay. She was just crying. "You have to go," she said. " *Now.* " It was practically a wail.

The thing was that Billy was too stupid and he didn't understand. Not that he would have left her anyway. She'd said *Something bad is happening, and no one believes me* , but he still didn't really believe her; he still didn't understand. "You okay? Can you walk?"

El was crying like a banshee. It was scaring him real bad. She said, "I DON'T WANT TO GO." His heart was thumpin' away in his chest. She was gonna make him pass out. It felt like there was this pressure against his head and it was draggin' him down; he didn't think it was her doing it.

He said, "Kid, I don't – " and he realized they weren't alone.

They weren't alone, but they should be alone. Billy looked around and realized how fucking stupid he was. The road behind them was all dark; the black of the asphalt glittered against the grey sky. There was a storm rolling in, almost dark. The trees around them stretched up like mountains. No one else on the road. He'd always thought that the one blessing about moving to fucking bumfuck Indiana was that there wasn't ever anyone on the roads once you got outside of town; he could drive the way he wanted to. Fucking stupid. Fucking stupid. He didn't know why he'd taken the kid out of town. They were totally, totally alone, except they weren't.

There was that van that'd hit them, pulled up real close. It looked familiar which didn't make any sense. There were two or three other cars, he didn't know how many. Hurt his neck when he moved it too much, couldn't look over. He was too stupid and his first thought was *Sure hope you fucks have insurance* . Someone said, "There you are."

It was hard to remember it; his head hurt. Someone had clocked him in the face but he didn't really remember when or how he'd let that happen. Elijane was making this awful keening noise, sounded like an animal dying. He didn't know if that was in his head or if she was doing it out loud for real. He pulled her behind him; heard the thump of it when she slid against the side of the car.

There were five or six guys. He couldn't really count 'em. Maxine said before *Billy has like retardo strength, he can take four or five guys!* but not six and not when he was all fucked up already. He didn't really understand what was happening.

Two of the guys were real close to them. Billy wasn't sure when that had happened. They'd all got out of their cars so fast. He hadn't seen them getting out; he'd been looking at the kid. One of them was a big fat fuck like Hank but not at all like Hank; the other was tall and skinny.

The fat fuck told the kid, "Look, you don't have to be afraid." They were real close; Elijane was still clutching at Billy's arm. His bad arm, it was always his bad arm.

El was baring her teeth like a wild animal and Billy could still hear that noise in his head. " *You,* " she said; she wasn't talking to him. "I could have killed you. I could have."

"Can you?" said the skinny guy. "I don't think you can do too much of anything. Think we made sure of that."

Billy didn't know what was going on. He spit some blood out of his mouth. "What the fuck are you talking about?" Words sounded all mashed up. He tried to turn towards the kid; his neck hurt. "You know these guys?" She didn't answer him.

The fat fuck wasn't too close to them like the other guy and he

looked pretty scared. Billy didn't think he'd been driving. He was looking at the kid too. He said, "No one has to get hurt here."

El said again, "I COULD HAVE KILLED YOU." He saw her in some fancy little living room with a bunch of punks, photos smashed around her. She looked real cool; he'd have to tell her later.

Now the other three were real close too; okay so there was five altogether. One of them took a step forward. His hair was all white and he looked like a cartoon villain. He was wearing a brown suit. Billy felt a stab of fear go right through Elijane and into him. Felt like he'd seen him before too but that wasn't possible.

He was smiling. He said, "This went well, I think. I wanted to get you alone, maybe with the Wheeler boy or that little girl."

Billy didn't understand what he was talking about. El said in his head, *Max* and he saw red; it was already going into his eyes.

"Fuckin' kill you if you touched my sister – "

Someone bumped him into the side of his car; the door was open and he almost fell over. He was too dizzy for this. It wasn't good. It wasn't just from gettin' hit. There was something wrong with him and it felt like somebody was pushing him down – he could almost see them.

The guys didn't have guns but they had these long poles; Billy'd seen them on the TV before, electric shock. Elijane was real scared of them. Billy saw her like how she'd been before he ever knew her: so little, dressed in a hospital gown. He heard her say *Papa*. He saw it. She was walking with creepy cartoon villain down a bright hallway; he was holding her hand. He said *I want you to do something for me*.

He looked over at Billy. He was still smiling. "He'll do," he said. He turned towards the tall skinny guy. "Load them up. I want her with us."

"NO, YOU CAN'T TAKE HIM," El said but they were already taking her. She slid out of his grasp like everyone always did. Billy swiped for her and then someone actually tased him. It hurt and it didn't really hurt; he didn't remember. It didn't feel like the way you'd

think it would feel from seein' it on the TV. He swung out and his fist connected with someone; somebody else yelled. El was further away and she was getting jostled into the black van. It was totally crazy but it looked like there was already a little kid in there; Billy still didn't understand. Then someone hit him in the face again and everything went real grey. *Just go to sleep*, someone said; it wasn't the kid.

When he opened his eyes again he was in a car and everything still hurt. It took him a while to figure out that he was in the car and that they'd actually tied him up. They'd done a pretty good job; he worked away at the ropes for a while.

Fat Fuck and his pal, the human stringbean, were in the front of the car. Fat Fuck was turned around looking at him. "He's awake again," Fat Fuck said. Billy didn't know when he'd been awake before.

The human stringbean was driving. He didn't turn around. It was nighttime now – had to be late – and the bald spot on his head was real shiny when they drove under a streetlight. "That's okay. We're almost there."

Billy felt this kind of blind panic rising up in him; he'd only felt it before maybe once or twice. He'd done this. He'd taken the kid out of town where they could get to her. He'd taken her and he'd fucked it all up for both of them.

He spit some blood out of his mouth. It hit the back of the passenger seat in front of him and ran down. "What d'you want with her."

Fat Fuck was still looking at him; Billy wished he'd aimed for his face. He shifted again. His arms were tied up behind him pretty tight and it made his shoulder burn. "Don't worry," Fat Fuck told him. "We're not going to hurt her."

"You motherfucker." They'd crashed his car. "She coulda died." It was hard to talk; he had a lot more he wanted to say.

"Yeah, well, she didn't die, did she?" the human stringbean said. "Neither did you. Lucky us. You're our collateral now."

Billy spit some more blood and rolled his head back against the seat of the car. Some insurance. "Think you got about an hour left to live, man."

The car rolled past a big gate and turned into it. Billy saw a number on it; 1800. It was a big dark building; it didn't really look like any kinda government place that he'd ever seen. Probably that shit was just on the TV too.

Stringbean laughed at him. "Oh, do you think you can do something?"

"Don't have to," Billy said. "She's gonna kill you."

They parked the car and just sat there. Billy started telling them all the ways the kid was gonna kill them. He could think up a lot of ways; El probably had some more. Fat Fuck said, "Jesus, shut him up," so then he got booted in the face again.

When he opened his eyes again it was all dark and for a couple minutes Billy thought he'd actually gone blind. Then he realized he was layin' on his fucking face and one of his eyes was swollen shut anyway. That was about usual. His arm burned and his head hurt and the kid wasn't there.

It was real quiet but he remembered some yelling; he thought maybe that'd been El. He thought maybe she'd yelled a lot.

Eventually he sat up and looked around. It was real dark but he thought he was in a basement or something. Someone had untied him but the ropes were still around his wrists. He pulled them off and his shoulder screamed; he remembered the fuckin' windshield blowing out on him.

There was a big piece of glass in his shoulder, right below his collarbone. Maybe an inch or so. It was kind of sticking out but some of it'd broken off inside of him. Billy managed to get his shirt off and then he fished around trying to get it out; he probably screamed a little. It bled a lot and he thought probably he shouldn't have taken it

out. He didn't know shit about stuff like that and probably there was a vein there. Funny thing, there were veins everywhere.

He was okay with bleeding though; he seemed to do that a lot. It was in a bad place and he couldn't really tie it up so he bunched up his shirt and pressed it against the wound. He looked around some more. He felt really dizzy and like he was gonna pass out again. He was pretty sure there was still more glass in his shoulder.

After a while he felt less dizzy and he didn't pass out. Billy stood up. He was definitely in a basement; it was pretty big. There wasn't too much in there and what was there was a bunch of junk; old boxes and shit. There was a big metal door with a thick glass pane like for cold storage or something; there was a light on in the hall outside and he fucked around with the door for a long while before he moved on to the rest of the room. There was a little hallway that'd been bricked off; an old employee's bathroom that didn't work. Everything had about four pounds of dust on it.

There were two windows, one in the bathroom and one in the main room across from the door. They were those real small rectangle ones that you could creak open; they reminded him of the little storm-window in Harrington's basement. They had bars on them which wasn't like Harrington's basement.

He spent a long time messing around with the windows too, even though there was no way he could fit out of one of 'em anyway. When he fucked around with the one in the old bathroom he moved his arm the wrong way and about fell over. It started bleeding real bad again so he had to sit down. He still felt that really dull panic in the back of his head. It was like a little siren going off. *You did this. You did this.* It sounded like the kid; he was real sorry.

He started to shake real bad and he closed his eyes to calm down, just for a second. The second turned into a real long time.

When he opened his eyes his arm hurt worse. Someone had put a blanket over him and the kid was there with him. It was too fucking weird; she wasn't really with him but he could feel her there with him. She was in his head or something he guessed.

He could feel her panic like a heart attack. *I'MSORRYI'MSORRYI'MSORRY* – it almost knocked him out again.

“Are you okay?” he asked out loud like a fucking moron. It was morning or daytime or something now; he could see the light coming in from that little window and everything was still all grey.

I'MSORRYI'MSOSORRYMYFAULT –

Shit. Fuck. It was too insane. His lips were cracked and sticking together; he wet them with his tongue. “Where are you?” She didn’t know. Had to be in the same building; he’d only seen the one. 1800. “I’m going to come and get you.”

NONONONO . Guns. They had guns; she showed him. Cold metal. They’d pushed one against her back. *Think about your friend.*

Billy didn’t really care about the guns. *I’m gonna come and get you*, he said again then realized he hadn’t actually said it. She heard it anyway.

No. She’ll get you.

Christ, there was a fuckin’ chick too? Anyway Billy guessed he could hit a girl if he had to. If it was a real bitch, like someone who’d take the fucking kid, he could hit her. He’d have to figure out how to –

No. A girl. Like me.

Billy didn’t understand and then he understood. Jane must be really close if she could show him all this shit.

He understood a lot in about ten seconds. He understood a lot; some things she’d seen and some things she’d put together. Some things she hadn’t known before. *Papa found me.*

He saw the white-haired guy. He was walking down a hallway again, this time with a different little girl, it wasn’t 011. Shit. Real little girl maybe six or seven and she had real dark hair, *they didn’t cut her hair* 011 thought. Fuck it was too weird hearin’ her think in his mind (in her mind). Little girl with real dark hair and she was cold and she was tired; she’d just lost a tooth last week and Billy didn’t know why

the hell he knew that.

She's from the lab, he guessed. *Like you. Secret weapon.* 011 didn't know, didn't care. Billy didn't blame her.

She was in the dark and then she was in the car, that little girl. Papa said he wanted her to find something and you always had to do what Papa said. Papa said that this thing – this person, my daughter – was very important. She'd hurt him very bad and she'd ruined everything; he needed to find her. She needed to make things right.

Billy understood a lot of things. 011 had been so careful and Jim had been so careful but Papa had found her. He'd used his other little girl to find her. His other little girl, she was better and she hadn't hurt him and she hadn't sent him away. 011 had been so confused and she'd kept waking up in places that weren't her *bed*. She felt this strange pull like she had to go somewhere and she hadn't known where she was supposed to go. And she was so *weak* and sometimes her head hurt *so much* and she couldn't move things like she had before. She was so weak now. Mike was so worried about her and he said that if she was in trouble she had to call him but he didn't believe that Papa had found her; he said she'd sent him *away*. Max and Dustin had gotten into a fight at the arcade and she couldn't help them and then *Billy* had helped them and she'd thrown one guy; before that she could have thrown all three of them. Before that she could have moved the *whole building*.

She could *see* more stuff though; she could see so much more. She didn't know how she could see so much more. She could almost see where she was supposed to go. It was like this part of her was locked up and she couldn't get to it anymore, the part of her that could just *push* and things would move, but now she could see everything, even though she didn't mean to.

It was dark outside, it was dark out on the main street and it was dark out in the woods when she'd woken up. Woken up, she hadn't really been asleep. She felt too scared; they'd been *tooclose* this time even though she didn't understand. She walked back to the house; she could feel eyes on her. She walked along the edge of the woods and the edge of Lovers' Lake until she reached the gravel driveway. A bird sounded out in the dead air. The familiar light of the porch was

orange.

She could see Jim across town in his office, bored and annoyed; the video store had been broken into again and he knew it was the fuckin' (*badword*) Jarvis brothers. He wanted to go home and have a *drink* . He wasn't thinking about 011, *El*.

011, *El*, went inside the house and put her boots on; she put her backpack on. It was Thursday night and Wednesday night Jim was supposed to come home early and watch a movie with her but he hadn't come home until late. She had watched the movie alone; Gregory Peck in *To Kill A Mockingbird* . Sometimes Jim lied and she wished he wouldn't lie. Friends don't lie. Sometimes she felt so safe with him but sometimes she didn't feel safe at all. Jim wasn't her real family and he had said before that she made him so tired. She was so *much* .

She had worn her pink dress to feel better. It was raining and it was snowing and she had been alone all day. Mike and Dustin and Lucas and Will and Max were at school. She didn't get to go to school and they would forget her. Jim said maybe soon, maybe next year if it was safe, but she thought that was a lie too. She wanted to see *Mama* and she had already been out so she should just go; Jim wouldn't even notice. But then she had seen Billy instead. Gone and talked to him and he'd been so sad and he'd been thinking *Steve* and she didn't understand; Steve was a friend and he was Billy's friend too. If he was thinking *Steve* why didn't he go and see Steve? Steve liked Billy; the two times she had gone out to eat and they had both been there he'd been thinking *Billy Billy Billy* and he'd smiled at her really bright when he'd seen her looking. Steve smiled a lot, especially if Billy was there. He must like Billy a lot. Billy had been thinking *Max* too and he'd been thinking *Mom* and she'd been thinking *Mom* too so she should go and see him. She had scared Billy at his work and he'd called her *Jane* and no one called her Jane, not even Mike. Billy said he would take her to see *Mama* and he'd taken her to get food even though he was mad. She'd felt safe in his car, safe all the way back up onto the porch.

Jesus Christ , Billy thought, *they were there the whole time* but she was still going. She wanted to show him.

It was dark in the woods and there were *lights* in the woods and she could see Papa. He was smiling. It was almost time but it wasn't time yet , she was still too strong, and then Steve and Billy were there and they were yelling at each other and Billy had picked her up; he was really strong too. Billy carried her back to Steve's house – Steve's house was so *big*; he had *two dogs!* – and she could tell Steve was angry. Steve was Dustin's friend and Max's friend and Billy's boyfriend but she wasn't supposed to tell that part.

She liked Steve but he didn't like her, sometimes. He was scared of her. Steve had made her spaghetti even though he didn't like her right then and he was scared of her. Billy ate some too, and then Jim came in and yelled like he always had. He thought she was a stupid kid; he said she had nightmares. *You're my nightmare!* she'd said. She wished she hadn't said it.

She hadn't remembered until now that Papa had been there. She didn't know how she could have forgotten; she'd been forgetting all year.

She understood now though. She understood that he had been there. He had been there for a long time. She understood that he had been waiting and that he had been doing this to her; she wasn't just *too scared* like Jim had said and she wasn't losing her powers like Mike and Dustin and Will and Lucas had said. That little girl had been taking them from her; she'd been taking them into herself.

What they need you for, then? Billy asked her.

She didn't answer him for a long time; Billy thought maybe she'd tired herself out or something, showing him all that. He definitely felt tired. Then she said, *He wants me to open the gate .*

The gate. The kids were always talking about the gate. They talked about it like it was a movie; talked about it in capital letters. The Gate. She'd sent him there before, *Papa* , she'd sent herself there. She had had to if she wanted to save Mike. She had gotten out but she hadn't thought about Papa getting out.

He wanted her to take him back. The things he'd seen, they could show everybody. The way he looked, Billy thought he'd lost his mind;

he'd never seen somebody look like that before. *So beautiful and deadly*, he'd said to her just last night and she'd been so *scared* and she was alone. *Maybe that's where you really belong.*

Don't listen to him. He's fucking with you. She didn't answer him. *Don't do it.*

He said he'll give me my powers back.

Billy knew what it meant if she got her powers back. *Yeah, how can he do that?*

I don't know, Elijane said; Billy thought she knew. She didn't want to say it or think it so he didn't know. She said, *I don't want to hurt anybody*. She was fading away from him so Billy got up and looked at the window some more; he went out and looked around at the room. *You can't get out*, Elijane told him real matter of fact. Billy guessed it was so nice that she could just see everything. *I'm sorry. I didn't know.*

Billy hadn't known either. *I'm gonna come and get you.*

You can't get out. They already hurt you.

Was like she was mocking him. *Get out of my head, I gotta take a piss*, Billy told her.

He was so gross, she thought. *I'm sorry.*

Just get out.

She did, and then he was alone.

He was alone for a while; he felt real sorry too. He really couldn't get out like Elijane had said. He'd been over and over the room about twenty times. It had just made him tired and he'd had to keep sitting down like an old person. There was a lot of blood on the floor and all over his jeans and his shirt; he hadn't realized it was that bad.

He didn't know what to do. After a while he just sat down like a fucking asshole; he laid down like a fucking asshole. It felt like it wasn't real. He looked out the little window at the grey sky and tried

to think about what the fuck he was supposed to do. There wasn't anything he could really do. He felt fucking hopeless and he felt fucking helpless and he actually felt too fucking tired to really feel either of those things.

Everything was too confusing. He didn't know if it was from being hit in the head half a dozen times or if it was from Elijane sendin' her memories through him again; everything felt too fuzzy and it was like he couldn't focus on anything. Kinda like when he had his fuckin' baby panic attacks except this time he just wanted to sleep. He shouldn't sleep; he needed to figure out how to get out and get to the kid.

His mind kept wandering and he kept thinking of other shit instead. He didn't mean to keep thinking of other shit instead. He didn't know what time it was or what day it was; it might even be Sunday or Monday by now. If it was Monday Maxine would notice he was missing and she'd be pissed the hell off; he could see her little scowl and her face gettin' redder and redder when she realized what a fucking asshole he was. If it was Monday he was supposed to give Sinclair a ride to school; he apologized in his head. Now Lucas would really know he was for shit.

Max. He kept thinking about Max even though he should be thinking about a way to get out; he didn't really see how he could get out. What if he never got out and Max just thought he'd ditched her forever. He needed to get out and get to Max so his dad didn't do any fucked up shit to her. He still had time, he thought. He hoped.

He had literally nothing but fucking time. There was no clock or nothin' and he had no idea what time it was or how much time was passing. He thought maybe he should try to wash his shoulder off but there was no water in the bathroom. He just laid there like a fucking dummy. After a long time – it was dark again – the metal door creaked open and the fat fuck from before was standing in the doorway. He had his taser and he had a paper bag. He stared at Billy.

"I brought you some food," he said. Billy hadn't expected him to say anything.

Billy stared at him. He hadn't expected anyone to come in either; he

wasn't ready for him. He was all the way across the room so Billy couldn't jump him or anything. He really didn't want to say anything at all but his fucking sarcastic mouth started flapping before he even knew it. "Really fucking sweet of you."

Fat Fuck ignored him. He set the bag down, staring at him.

"Why you guys doing this?"

Fat Fuck didn't answer him. Billy licked his lips; they tasted like blood and he didn't know why. He tried again. He just wanted to know. "She's just a kid. She don't know anything."

The guy was sweating even though it was pretty cold down here. "We're not going to hurt her," he said; he'd said that before. "She just needs to do one thing."

"What, open that fuckin' gate? You'll all die." He'd seen it, before. He remembered what she'd shown him.

He was quiet for a long time. "He has a plan."

"*Stop talking to him,*" someone said from out in the hall.

Fat Fuck ignored that too. He set a water bottle down beside the paper bag.

"What day is it?" Billy asked him.

"Monday night." Shit. What the fuck? He didn't see how that could be. "You were out for a while. I gave you a blanket."

"You're gonna make me cry, man," Billy told him. That just got him a long stare.

"We're not gonna hurt her," he said again. "You should eat something."

"Fuck you," Billy said.

Fat Fuck left; Billy heard the clink of the lock when he closed the door. Coulda done something, too stupid. After a while he managed

to get up. He ate the food.

The next day – had to be the next day, it was light out, anyhow – when the guy came back again for him, Billy was ready. He was sittin’ right by the door; Fat Fuck skidded a little and looked real surprised to see that he’d moved from the corner. He definitely hadn’t been some kinda guard before.

“Look, my shoulder hurts real bad, man,” Billy told him because that was true. He stood up. “Think it’s infected,” he said because that was true too. “You think you can look at it?”

Fat Fuck hesitated; Billy tried not to look at the taser hanging from his belt. “Just let me – “ he started to turn towards the door and Billy grabbed him and clocked him in the face two times. He fell down and Billy went right out the door.

He got about about ten feet which was further than he’d expected. Someone grabbed him by his shoulder and swung him around; Billy clocked him in the face too. It was the tall skinny bald guy from before. He slid halfway down the wall and Billy really almost thought he’d get away but everything started spinning. He could feel that voice in the back of his mind again; it wasn’t Jane. *Just go to sleep* .

Fuck you, Billy said in his head and then the bald guy tased him; Billy screamed and went down. It felt like little shocks going through his body, paralyzing him. They froze him.

The bald guy had a real mean look on his face. He was grinning and standing up above him. There was some blood in his teeth; Billy felt glad. Couldn’t really breathe though. It hurt real bad, a burn against his ribcage.

“You *really* think you’re hot shit, don’t you?” the guy said. He tased him again; Billy threw up on himself.

Everything blurred like crazy and Billy saw double; the whole hallway tilted. *Just go to sleep* . He was gonna pass out again.

The bald guy stood up and stood looking at him. He was deciding what to do. He was still grinning. Billy was pretty sure if he tased

him again he'd actually die.

He stomped hard on his shoulder instead; Billy screamed and then everything went grey again.

He could never get any peace. The kid wasn't there but she was in his head. She kept worming away at him; she was seeing all the shit. Time passed by in this weird slow-drip; when he opened his eyes again it was nighttime and he didn't know how he could have fallen asleep again or gotten knocked the fuck out so easily.

He was locked up again, back in the dusty basement. Jane kept coming to him and crying. She made him so tired; she kept fuckin' waking him up. She wanted to see if he was okay. He wasn't really worried about himself. *I told you, you can't get out. You shouldn't have done that*, she said; Billy didn't answer her.

She looked so different in his head; she didn't look like herself or anyone like her. Not really a person, kinda like this crude imitation or something like a bad memory. In his head (in *her* head) she wasn't Jane or El or the chief's daughter; she was 011. It was on her wrist, she remembered the needle. Billy hadn't seen that before. Felt like a fire.

Fuck shit fuck why hadn't he just taken her home. He could have just taken her home. She was a kid and he didn't have to listen to her. Hop had said *you see anything, anything weird* but Billy'd been too busy fagging around running after Steve Harrington to notice any shit; that fucking van had almost hit Maxine five weeks ago.

It'd been right there. God. It'd been right there; Max and Billy had put their middle fingers up. Kill you if you touch my sister. What the fuck you say about my sister. *Max said you've always been a dick, but you weren't always so angry*. Fuck him, fuck you, fuck them. They didn't know shit about him and Max.

I didn't know, 011 kept saying. Billy didn't know what the fuck she

didn't know. He didn't want to call her that either, fucking number.

She kept squirming in his head and making him confused. She was seeing too much stuff that he didn't want her to see. He told her to get out; he didn't want her to see the stuff he was thinking about. When she was in there and he was yellin' at her though he didn't have to think about the fuckin' glass in his shoulder or the marks on his chest from the taser or way his whole body seemed to burn now when he breathed in.

011 – El, Eleven, Jane – was flipping through his memories like a stack of cards; he guessed she was having a real good time. He thought he could push her out if he really wanted to. He guessed he didn't really want to.

Flip. He was eighteen years old and hounding Steve Harrington at basketball practice; he looked like a real good person to annoy. He watched the triangle of sweat on the back of Harrington's t-shirt move when he arched his shoulders. He'd told Billy to shut the hell up three times already and Billy wasn't even getting *started* with him yet; it was too good. Steve Harrington thought he was hot shit. He was probably one of those guys who thought he could have whoever he wanted. You never got what you wanted; Billy needed him to know that. *Flip.*

All right but Billy didn't want her to see about Steve. He just really didn't want her to see. She didn't need to be thinking about him and Steve. *Get out of my head. Quit buggin' me.*

I can't leave you alone. You're in the dark.

It wasn't that dark; there was that little window. Not that he could fucking fit through it or anything. He didn't even think she could fit through it. It had those bars on it anyway, nailed shut. Useless fucking window, was like a tease or something. The grass outside was brown-yellow, a long line of nothing. *Go and talk to that kid some more, get her to let you go.*

*She **won't**,* Elijane said; Billy didn't know how she could know that. *Papa told her she has to help him. She always does what he says. I always did. You **have** to. Do you understand?*

Yeah, that ain't your real dad.

She didn't say anything but he *saw* her again. She pulled him right out of his head and into her head. Was nice to leave for a while.

It didn't matter that it wasn't her real dad or that she knew that now. She was real small again waitin' in her little room; it was a fucking cell. She had heard one of the other people from Outside say that once. Sometimes when she left the room there were other people there from Outside and four times a week there was a lady who helped her take a shower. The other people didn't talk to her that much; Papa said they weren't special like her and she shouldn't pay any attention to them. A long time ago she had got to go to the Playroom and there were little kids like her but she didn't get to go there anymore. They weren't special like her and Papa said that she shouldn't think of them anymore. You always had to do what Papa said. If you didn't do what Papa said he wouldn't get mad but you'd go in that other room that was really dark.

She didn't like that room. If she did really good today Papa said maybe she could go Outside; she wasn't sure what she was going to have to do though but sometimes it was easy.

Sometimes it wasn't easy and it was really hard and it made her head hurt, like when she had moved that soda can. Soda, she didn't know what that was. Burns your throat. It's not good for little kids. But she'd moved it and then she'd crushed it and Papa had been so proud of her; he said she was doing so good. He brought her toys sometimes. She loved her little bear that he'd got her. He'd let her play with a mouse last month and today she was going to get to see a real cat, not just like in a picture. She wanted to make him happy; she wanted to be so good. If she was so good one day she could have a mommy and a daddy and they'd be Outside and she wouldn't have to go into that dark room anymore. So she had to do what he said. *Do you understand?*

Billy understood. He didn't really want to but she wasn't goin' away. She grabbed at something in his mind before he could get it away and pulled it towards herself; he guessed they were doing that shit again. He was running home with his bat and he'd skinned both his knees but Dad hadn't even yelled at him; it was a real good day. Dad

had got off early from work and they'd played baseball in the park for four hours; he didn't drink all the time and he wasn't mean all the time. Tomorrow might be different but for right now Billy was real happy. He had a project in school and he'd worked so hard all week and he was gonna get an A on it; Dad might be proud even though it was just social studies. He could work it out and he could make his dad happy and then he wouldn't hit Billy and his mom anymore and they could all be happy. Sometimes he couldn't work it out and Dad got mad anyway but if Billy wasn't so goddamn dumb he could work it out. He could be good if he tried.

Fucking embarrassing little kid shit; he didn't want Jane to know about that. He looked at his memory too instead of thinkin' about her. It was so real and so clear even though it'd just been a single day he'd forgotten about. He thought he was maybe seven because he remembered that stupid shirt he had on with the scratchy collar; it'd been a birthday present from his uncle's new girlfriend. Billy and his dad ate hot dogs from a vendor and Dad had laughed really hard at something Billy'd said. When Dad threw the ball Billy knocked it over the fence and Dad had laughed again and shook his shoulder and said *That's real good, boy*. Dad liked baseball and he liked football; he was always watching it on the TV. Billy like basketball but Dad said that basketball was turning into a nigger-sport here in the city so Billy didn't say he liked basketball. He could still play it in the alleyway with the boys down the block though; Mom would tell Dad that Billy'd stayed late at school.

Jane was confused. *What's a nigger?*

Shit. She wasn't supposed to see that. *You ain't supposed to say that word.*

That's what you called Lucas. Before.

He guessed she'd seen that already too; there wasn't nothing he could do about that. *Yeah, but you ain't supposed to say that.*

Steve got mad at you.

Yeah, because you ain't supposed to say it or think it.

Oh. Like a swear word.

Sure. Like a swear word.

Your dad says it.

My dad's for shit.

She was confused again. He thought she'd knew already. *You were just happy with him. What happened?*

Nothing happened; it was always happening. *You don't understand.*

She wanted to see more than that. She was a little fucking earmite, oh she wanted to understand. *Do **you** understand?* She was looking for something else now and she found what she wanted.

Billy didn't understand; he was too stupid. Always too stupid. He was eight years old flickin' matches into the little trash can in the kitchen. He could light three in a row. The linoleum tile was bone-white; it'd been yellow before. Dad came home early and he was so mad; Billy was gonna burn their goddamn house down. He should know better. Dad smacked him real hard in the ear and then yanked his arm back and threw him. Billy hit the sharp corner of the wall by the back door and almost didn't cry. Dad thunked the little trash can into the sink and poured water on it. *Clean it up*, he said. He was real calm and that was bad. Billy cleaned it up. Out in the living room Dad was on the couch now. He had his beer and he had his cigarette; he was just holding it in two fingers and looking at it. *Come over here, I want to show you what happens when you start fires* . He was smiling. Billy's legs felt like blocks of cement planted in the doorway; he wasn't going to cry again. *It's going to be so much worse if you don't come over here.* Billy went over there. The cherry of the cigarette was orange and it burned the back of his neck. Billy screamed; he screamed like a little girl so Dad did it again and then he hit him three times. Later when Mom came home she helped him clean up and she held him and cried and kissed him so he was okay. She said *I'm sorry baby I'm so sorry I'm so sorry*. She shouldn't be sorry because she didn't do it; she had been at work and anyway Billy was okay. Mom said he was always okay and he was so brave so he was always okay. He still remembered the orange round of the cigarette, though, it was bright

like the sun when you closed your eyes.

He could feel Elijane's little presence in the back of his mind like a headache. *Your mom. You miss her.*

No shit I miss her.

She was mean too?

No. She was never mean.

She could have stopped him. If she wanted to.

Billy didn't want to talk about his mom and he didn't want to talk about that. She had tried to stop him; she'd just get hit too. He remembered how Susan had kicked his old man out of his own house for goddamn near a month after he'd beaten Billy and how he'd thought, *shit, even my mom never did that.* He'd felt real guilty after he'd thought that though. He told Elijane, *Yeah, she couldn't stop him.*

She didn't answer him; she'd found something she liked. She was goddamn nosy. He guessed she thought she could just look at whatever the fuck she wanted. He was too tired to stop her. *Flip.*

The orange round of the cigarette turned into the hazy grey-yellow of the sun behind a cloud. Walking along the busy streets of Santa Monica with his mom; they were alone and they were happy. It was a Friday afternoon and it was hazy and bright out even though it was almost evening. The air was thick with humidity and with smog. They stopped in a bookstore, they stopped in the toy store. Mom bought him a new action figure and a model of a 1967 Chevy Camaro. It was blue and it was so cool. He was gonna buy a car like that when he got old enough to drive, he told her. Uncle Brian worked at a garage and he was gonna teach Billy about cars when he turned ten. Mom's smile felt the same as the sun; he could feel it right fucking now. They stopped and got donuts from the good place on the Promenade. They were gonna eat them all on the bus ride home. Dad wasn't coming home until Sunday; Mom said Billy could rent any movie he wanted tomorrow. Of course she'd watch it with him. On the corner of the sidewalk there was a lady with a flowy dress playing guitar. Her dress was pale-yellow like the sun. She was

playing a Bob Dylan song and it sounded good. Out on the next corner two guys were standing close together and kissing each other right there on the street; smog and steam from the buses and the sewer grates curled around them. One of them was real tall. Mom put her hand on the side of Billy's cheek and turned his face away. *Baby, don't look at that*, she said. Billy held onto the side of her blouse as they crossed the street even though he was nine and too old to do that. He could smell her perfume; she smelled like salt from the ocean and lilies.

No no no. Before that. When was the first time? *The first time what*. The first time you got hit. *How are you supposed to remember that, why do you want to know*. I just want to understand. It's not that bad; he needed to learn. That's what Dad said.

He hadn't got hit at first, it was a yank too hard on his arm or a push to the back that'd knock him down when he was too slow to get out of the way. He was only on the steps with his Legos; he had a whole village. Spoiled. Some people had nothing at all. *Kid doesn't have any sense; he's always in the fucking way. Leave him alone, let him cry*. Three years old and he'd pissed in their big bed like a baby; Daddy had knocked him onto the floor and his back hurt now. *Look what he did. Look what he fuckin' did*. Locked the door to his room and he was cold in his bed because he wasn't allowed to change his pajamas; he had to learn. He didn't want the kid to see that. Baby, baby, you're such a fucking baby. Mom's crying out in the hallway, sounds like glass breaking. You wanna cry, I'll give you something to cry about. Get out. *Flip*. She went to something else.

The sun was too bright, winking away at him. It winked away like Tracey's fake-gold ankle bracelet, catching in the light. Billy'd got her that last fall, six months ago; one day he could get her a real-gold one if she wanted. She didn't smell like flowers; she smelled like vanilla. Fairmount Park in Riverside was crowded but not too crowded. They walked down the uneven concrete path and Tracey laughed at him when a tree branch smacked him in the face. Billy liked holding her little hand; it was so small and it fit well in his. Totally cool. He swung their arms out like a big dope. He was making her laugh. She was wearin' a shirt he liked. He liked the blue of it against her dark hair. Max skated backwards on her blades ahead of them; she was

talkin' and talkin' and her mouth was purple-blue from her Slush Puppie. She was making him laugh. She'd just turned twelve and her lame-ass dad had forgot her birthday. Tracey'd come over early, right after school; she said twelve was a big deal. They'd got Max three presents and Trace spilled nail polish on Billy's bed; he yelled but he wasn't really mad. He liked to be with Max and with Trace. They were fun and dumb and he liked hearing 'em laugh. They even laughed when he yelled at them. Look at Billy, he's soooo scary, Tracey'd said. She caught his arm when he raised it at her and pulled him down on the bed, smelled like nail polish.

Flip. Max was dumb but she was a kid so it was okay to be dumb. Maxine, nobody calls me that. He felt bad for her and her dad sucked; was a fuckin' pill-popper from the sound of it, left her at the grocery store one day. She and her moms had moved here from three hours away and she didn't have any friends. Billy didn't have any friends either but that was nothin' new. *Why you always tryin'a hang out with me, ain't you got any friends?* Max turned red because he already knew she didn't have any friends; he didn't need to say that and he felt bad. She said that the girls at school made fun of her clothes and her shoes. Billy said those weren't the kinda girls she should be hangin' out with; he said they were rich bitches anyway and Max made a face. *I wouldn't mind being a rich bitch. Then I could go to private school and not with these sluggos.* They made fun of her for having to take the bus too. Her moms wouldn't let her take her skateboard into the city. Billy said when he got his license he'd take her in to school. No skin off his back; it was two blocks away from the high school. Max asked if he would teach her to drive. Billy said maybe without meaning it.

Flip. Max was an annoying little brat. She talked too much and she never smiled. She was too skinny and she hogged the bathroom. Her hair was everywhere, red hair like his mom's cloggin' up the shower drain and it freaked him the fuck out. Billy didn't know what to do with a little kid around all the time. He got right in her face one day annoying her and she slugged him *really hard* ; honestly maybe she was kinda cool. She got him a present for Christmas and he hadn't got her anything. She said sorry for taking his room. She gave him a pack of baseball cards and a little model car of a Firebird because she'd seen the ones in the basement. She'd wrapped them herself and Billy felt stupid opening them; she'd made him open them. Neil and

Susan were going out to LA for New Years and Billy wanted to go to a party at Stephanie Frank's house but he said he'd watch the kid. Steph's parties were lame anyway but he'd told Tracey Russo he'd go. Tracey always liked him; he'd decided he wanted to make her his girl. Tracey was Italian and his dad said that was almost as bad as being a Jew or a nigger but Billy didn't care about what his dad said when it came to be about Tracey. She came over instead and she and Max did each other's hair and ate cookie dough. Girls could always get along in two seconds so maybe that would be okay. Billy drank Susan's wine coolers and Tracey made fun of him. God she was a mouthy bitch; Billy was into it. Max had a wine cooler too and Billy said she'd get piss-ass drunk off two sips. They all watched *The Year Without A Santa Claus*. Later Tracey said Max wanted to impress him.

El kept on lookin' through his shit; the memories whipped on by him. He was so tired. He wished she'd stop. He wanted to go to sleep again. *El. She's really Eleven. I don't care how fuckin' old she is.* His arm hurt; he'd got all sweaty from work and the cast itched. Max makin' a face in the diner. She'd just stuffed a whole dinner-roll in her mouth. *He's not my brother!* Billy was waiting to see the kid. He was kinda jazzed up even though he didn't want to be out with Maxine and Steve fuckin' Harrington and his stupid fuckin' sunglasses. *I can't believe you faggots let me go around calling her Ellen for eight months.* Elijane, sounded like El-or-Jane. She thought that was cute. She was just 011. *You're not a number,* Billy wanted to tell her. She slipped away from him in his mind; she didn't want to hear it. *Then get out.* I can't leave you alone.

Flip. He was always alone; his mom had been sick for a long time but she was coming home soon. Dad used to talk like she was gonna get better and what they were gonna do when she got better but he didn't talk about it like that anymore. It was the summer before eighth grade and Billy didn't have no one to pal around with this year; all the guys were goin' off to camp and shit but Billy wanted to be with his mom. She was gonna stay in their spare bedroom now; he and his dad had fixed it up for her. At the corner store little Tracey Russo was hanging around waiting for her moms to get off work. Between April and June she'd finally got some tits and she looked real okay. Definitely shouldn't say that to her. Tracey Russo was the kinda girl who'd pop you right in the face; she was cool as shit. She

gave him an extra dime so's he could buy the apple soda he liked. *You got any gum?* he asked her. *Not for you!* She gave him some anyway. She said he could come over if he liked but then he didn't see her for the whole summer anyway; he couldn't leave his mom alone. She got real bad real fast. *Flip.*

Mom's face turned into Susan, fluttering after him like a nervous bird. His old man had popped him one for no real reason; it was the first time Susan had seen. She was clutching a towel from the laundry and twisting it up in her thin little hands. She never fuckin' stopped moving and it made him nervous. She wanted to know where he was storming off to. *Don't fucking worry about what I'm doing* . She wasn't his mom. Max sat small and sullen over on the couch as he shrugged his jacket on. *You DON'T have to scream at her all the time. She just wants you to like her!* Billy said *What's to like* real sarcastic and tossed her the last two sticks of gum from his jacket pocket. Max almost smiled, turned back to their little TV. She flipped the remote twice. *Flip.*

Tracey's and his anniversary was on a Friday; Billy couldn't believe she'd hung around him for one whole year. He remembered the date because she'd smacked him and told him four times. *What, it's the fourteenth,* he said so she smacked him again at his locker and he laughed. He knew it was on the twelfth. Tracey's mom wasn't home and she turned all the lights off in the living room and lit candles. She wanted it to be the real romantic shit; she put on her record by The Birthday Party. She was wearing a new dress that was slinky and purple. Billy'd got her a necklace she liked and she was wearin' that too. He'd saved his money for three months and it was real silver. He'd got her two bracelets before and a little ring that fit on her pinkie; he liked buying stuff for her that made her feel pretty. *I never feel pretty,* she'd said. *You are pretty,* he told her. She didn't have fancy clothes or fancy jewelry like some of the girls at school; Billy wanted her to feel good. She *was* pretty and she looked pretty in the dress and in the necklace and she wanted to have sex but he couldn't get hard. Sometimes that happened; there was something wrong with him. Tracey said it was okay but he knew she was upset. She always wanted to do stuff with him; sometimes he liked it when Max was around so they couldn't. Billy said sorry three times. Tracey said it was okay because she knew there was something wrong with him

and she didn't like him saying that shit about himself. She sat on his lap and held his hands; she held his head in her hands. Billy said sorry, I'm sorry. He said *Are you my girl?* and Tracey said she was. She looked like she wanted to cry. Tracey said *Billy, I love you* so Billy said *I love you* too. Then later he could do it and she was happy again. She said it didn't matter anyway. She said most guys just wanted to paw at their girls all the time and that she was lucky; Billy didn't know. Billy said he'd take her out to a fancy place tomorrow and he wouldn't curse at the waiter again for looking at her. He said he'd be nice for three hours. *Can you do that?* Tracey asked him; she was a mouthy little bitch and she laughed at him when he said that. She said try for one hour. *Flip*.

Billy got out of school early and took the bus to 42nd street; he could stop at the corner store and cut through the alleyway home. Mom thought he was gonna be at the library until five anyway; he had his first big project for the fifth grade. Mrs. Benson's beagle Molly was out in the yard like usual so Billy crouched on the ground and petted her for a while. It was too hot to leave a fuckin' dog outside. He gave Molly the crusts of his sandwich from lunch. Two houses down Rico Vasquez was in his garage lifting weights and the door was open so Billy went on in and talked to him. They'd been neighbors for Billy's whole life and Rico let him hang around him sometimes and gave him cigarettes even though Billy was just a kid and Rico was fifteen already; Rico thought Billy was real funny. Dad said the neighborhood was turning into a fucking ghetto but it was the same people here that'd always been. Sometimes the things Dad said made Billy feel so weird inside; Dad would just say it in front of everybody. He didn't think they lived in a fucking ghetto. Rico was doing chin-ups; he had black hair that he slicked back like a greaser in *West Side Story* or some shit. Billy watched the triangle of sweat on the back of his t-shirt; the arch of his shoulder-blades made Billy's stomach feel tight. Heard his mom say *Don't look at that*, turned his face away. His cheeks felt hot with shame. Billy looked at his sneakers instead. Rico was moving to San Francisco at the end of the month; he said, *Who's gonna drive you around now?* Billy said *You only had your damn license for bout a month*. Rico laughed. He said Billy could have his weights when he left and Billy said okay. *Flip*.

The funeral home smelled like old ladies' perfume and it was too hot

in here. Billy's tie scratched the back of his neck; he hadn't done it up right but it's not like his mom could help him with it now. He didn't want to be in here. Mom was right in the next room and he didn't want to go in there. It was an open casket so people could see her but when they buried her tomorrow in the morning it'd be closed. She was so thin now. Well she wasn't anything now. Why'd they call it a *wake*, wasn't like she was going to get up. His arm hurt where his dad had twisted it last night; Billy'd put on his mom's bracelet and Dad hadn't liked that. He hadn't taken it away though so Billy still had it on. He leaned against the doorway and rubbed at the sweat on his forehead; he was gonna have to go in there again and look at her. They'd gone to see her at the hospital two days ago before the nurses had moved the *body* and when Billy'd touched her hand it'd been cold, felt like a doll or somethin'. It was probably colder now and he didn't want to go in there. He could hear his dad and his uncle Brian talking by the door. Uncle Brian said *Billy's always welcome to stay with us* and Dad said *That's not necessary*. Billy played with the bracelet; he couldn't remember what the stones were called. Couldn't ask her anymore. *Flip*.

Billy climbed up the fire escape and climbed into Tracey's window; it was nine-thirty on a Thursday night and she was in her pajamas doin' summer reading. Billy's dad had thrown him around the whole kitchen and Tracey laid in her bed with him and held him. Billy had a big bruise on his shoulder and a belt-burn on his back; Trace had a cut on her cheekbone from her mom throwing a water glass. Billy kissed the side of her face; it was salty. She'd been crying. She could have called him. Tracey said she hated it here; Billy said *me too*. Billy said when he turned eighteen he'd take her out of here. School started in two weeks and he was going to be a junior. In six months he'd turn eighteen. Trace could go to night school somewhere, Billy could get a second job. He said *Take you wherever you want*. He hadn't taken her anywhere; he'd fucking left her. *Flip*.

Elijane said Tracey looked like a movie star; Billy didn't want her to see any more about Tracey. She was probably seeing anyway. *Flip*.

Blood in the bathroom, viscous and thick. He hadn't seen it but he knew. Steve in the car saying *so what happened to the – baby?* Christ Billy didn't like hearing him say *the baby*. Blood in the bathroom,

Billy's blood, his dad had kicked him so hard; his face cracked against the marble slab on the sink. Max screaming in the background. *Get the fuck out*, Billy's dad told her. *Get the fuck out*, Billy told the kid.

Flip. So much stuff swirling around him, it hurt. *Flip*. Billy flicked Max's polka-dot scrunchie out the window; she wouldn't shut the fuck up. Max cried and he felt bad. He hadn't thought she'd cry, stupid girl. He gave Susan a dollar to go buy her a new one. *Flip*. Billy liked that song 'Turning Japanese' by the Vapors; it made him think about Trace. Lou Coleberg in English class said it was about whacking off which was stupid. *Flip*.

There was no air-conditioning in the house and the air felt thick, the setting sun bleeding through the closed blinds. He sat up in the spare bedroom with his mom; she'd moved herself there two weeks ago, didn't want to keep his old man up when it hurt too bad. Joni Mitchell was on the record player. *Just before our love got lost you said, I am as constant as a northern star. I said, constantly in the darkness, where's that at? If you want me I'll be in the bar*. That was some real sarcastic shit – he'd never really listened to it before. It was time for his mom to take her medicine, smelled like cherry cough syrup. Just the smell of it made him feel sick, heavy stomach. She closed her eyes when Billy got up to get it and they were still closed when he came back over. She said she didn't want it anymore because it didn't work anyway. Billy knew that already. Mom started coughing too much so he got her a napkin; she wiped her mouth and it came away red. She folded it up like he hadn't seen. *You don't have to stay here, baby. It's Friday night. It's summer, you should go out and do something fun*. Billy felt this real hopeless feeling looking at her; he felt totally empty. Even years later he didn't know what that was. He loved her. Why would he go? He touched her hand; it was cold. He said *I'm okay here* and turned the record over. *Flip*.

Killin' time out in the hallway before fourth period with Jack and this other guy from the basketball team; Billy'd fought about everyone else in the school three times over. Trace came over to him in her little blue skirt and said *You better not skip math again, if you do I'll know*. Billy said *Are you my fuckin' mom?* She put her arms around him and put her hand in his back pocket and bit her lip real cute. He thought she'd kiss him but she hawked his weed instead. She laughed

up at his face; he liked this dimple she had on her right cheek. *I'll get you back tomorrow. It's my period, I need this* . She laughed even more up at his face. *Don't tell me that shit*. She said *Just warning you* ; they hung out every Thursday because her crazy mom worked late. Later at Tracey's house she was crashed out on the couch watchin' videos. Prince was on the TV singing 'When Doves Cry.' Tracey said *I bet he is really good in bed* because she loved to say shit like that to piss him off. *Would you really sleep with a fuckin' black guy?* Billy asked her. Tracey's eyes slid over to him and she didn't say anything for a long time. *I'm going to get a soda. Okay, get me one too*. She bounced up off the couch. *Flip* .

Trace's big eyes looking at him turned into Steve's big eyes looking at him; they both had these great brown eyes but they were so different. Billy was on Steve's couch and he couldn't breathe. Steve slid off him; he said *Okay, you're not okay* . There was that dip in his brow like when he was real upset. He said *You did this before. In my car*. Billy said *just give me a minute*. Steve put his hand on the side of Billy's face; Billy had just *fucking seen him* do that to Nancy Wheeler. That wasn't the right memory though. He didn't want to see that shit again. Steve pulled Billy down on top of him and Billy felt too *much too much too much*; he was fine he was fine and he needed Steve to know he was fine. He could still hook up; he could do whatever Steve wanted. Jesus God he didn't need the kid to see this but he was looking at it too. Steve said *WE DON'T HAVE TO DO THAT EVERY TIME*; he got real mad in about two seconds and Billy hadn't really understood. He understood now. Steve had just wanted him there.

Flip. Flip. Flip. It was too much – Max and Steve and Tracey and Mom and Neil and everything – it was too much and it hurt; Billy closed his eyes and closed the kid out. He could still feel her there, though, when he closed his eyes. When he finally fell asleep he just dreamed about it all again anyway.

He thought about Steve a lot; it was nothing new. He should be doing more than thinking about Steve but he couldn't help himself from thinking about Steve. Not really about the fight they'd had or the shit

he'd said or anything like that. It hurt too much. Billy could barely remember it; he'd been so mad and stupid. Always so mad and stupid; he knew he didn't have to be. Sometimes it felt like he had to be.

He didn't know what time it was or what day it was anymore; he was pretty sure it was Tuesday or Wednesday. Couldn't really be four fuckin' days already. He was pretty sure he'd got stomped on on Monday – the guy had said Monday – when he'd tried to break out and that was two days ago so it was probably Wednesday, had to be Tuesday or Wednesday by now. Tuesday Steve brought in coffee for the office and Wednesday that bitch that didn't like him brought it in. Steve acted like Billy never even fuckin' listened to him but Billy remembered a lot of shit he said; Steve talked a lot so it was a lot of shit. If it was after six he was probably home now. He was probably home now and not at his aunt's or something. Maybe he was at Nancy's house because his mom didn't like Nancy.

Okay Billy was thinking about it. Frigid Wheeler bitch. Maybe they were eatin' dinner with her folks or maybe they were in her room and Steve was saying his cute shit to her; maybe he was fucking her. He was probably fucking her. Why wouldn't he be fucking her. He was probably kissing her and layin' her down somewhere; she wouldn't be all rough like Billy would be.

He wasn't always like that. Billy'd thought that maybe Steve knew that and maybe he'd have been waiting for Billy but the longer he laid here in this dark fucking basement the stupider that seemed. He'd *been* waiting for him; Billy couldn't even tell him that he liked him. He tried to think if he'd ever said it. He didn't think he'd ever said it.

He felt Elijane's little presence again; it was like a whisper in the back of his skull and he tried to stop thinkin' about Steve or thinkin' about Steve fucking Nancy.

Jane's voice seemed smaller than usual. Maybe those people was figuring out how to take that away from her too. No, she said they were leaving her alone today; they had a new plan. Tomorrow she might have to go into the bath.

What the fuck? *The fuck kinda perverted shit's that?* Billy asked; she didn't understand why he was freaked out so maybe hopefully it wasn't creepy like he thought.

That's where I used to go when Papa needed me to find something. But I don't need to go there anymore. They don't know that. I can just do it now. Was weird talking to her in his head like this; she wasn't even using real words but he could understand her real clear. It was easier than talkin' to someone when you was looking at them. He could just think it and she'd just hear it. It had been annoying him a lot the last couple days but sometimes it'd be nice if it was just like that with regular people too.

Maybe you should go find the fuckin' chief and tell him to come get you then.

She didn't answer him for a long time; Billy wondered if maybe she'd gone away again or if someone was talkin' to her where she was. Like real-talking and not in-her-head talking. Then she said, *He's ... too far away. I can only do a little at a time. I'm going to try again tomorrow.*

Billy didn't answer her either. He knew he'd just told her to tell the chief to come and get her but he didn't really know how Hop was going to do that or if he could. Billy knew she didn't know where she was, not with the way he'd heard her cryin' and carryin' on when they'd first got here. He didn't know where they was at either. He'd seen that dumb sign on the side of the building for a split-second but that wasn't really going to help anything. Wasn't an address or anything; he didn't even know if they were in fucking Indiana anymore.

El was blathering on in her thoughts. Billy was pretty sure she was just talking to him just to be talking. He guessed it was nicer than being alone thinking about Steve fucking Nancy. Fuck. Now he was thinking about it again. He didn't want the kid to see that.

If El noticed that he was thinking about Steve bangin' Nancy or what Billy thought Wheeler's gross little mosquito-bite tits probably looked like (the only tits in the fucking world that weren't good tits) she didn't make any note about it. She was thinking about the chief.

She shouldn't have run away, she thought. She had known the bad people were coming for her and he hadn't listened to her; he thought she was just a stupid kid. The problem was that maybe she was a stupid kid; she couldn't be smart about things like he wanted her to be. She would have to tell him sorry now, Mike too; she'd been so mean. If Jim would come and help her now, he might not really be very mad. She could be nicer now and she could control her temper and she wouldn't make all the lights go off in his office when he wouldn't let her leave to see Mike.

He might be too angry still, though. He really might be. He had been *really* angry when she had been outside and she had made Steve and Billy come and get her. *You want to sleep out in the woods maybe I should let you sleep out in the woods. You've got all your friends out here looking for you and then you won't tell me what's wrong? You know my girl, MY GIRL, she would never pull half the shit you're pulling.* But maybe she could still get the bad people to go away somehow – she *knew* how – and then it would really be okay. Maybe he'd still want her to live with him. She could –

Jesus Christ. *Of course he fucking wants you to live with him, kid.*

She didn't answer again for a minute. *Or maybe I could stay with you.*

He tried to make his mind go totally blank. He didn't really see how there was a way he could get out of this or how she could stay with him; he couldn't take care of a fucking kid anyway.

He probably wasn't going to get out. Either the chief was going to find him and kill him for takin' the kid or these guys here were going to fucking kill him. Probably they would. He'd seen all their faces; he'd tried to fight them. If Hop couldn't get to Elijane they'd probably keep her alive if she'd do what they wanted; maybe put her back in that program or something. That'd be real bad but she'd still be alive. He was kinda thinking she should just do what they wanted.

Fuck but he really didn't want her to see that. He tried really hard to keep his mind totally blank; he actually went cross-eyed with it and probably looked like a fucking moron. Well really he probably looked like a fucking horror movie right about now.

He guessed it was working anyway. *Billy?*

Sure. Sure you can stay with me.

She started going off talking again. Really Billy thought that he was probably just seeing her thoughts or something and he had no clue how she was making that happen. He was seein' flashes of her summer the year before. Reading up in her little window with Hopper; she could hear the buzz of the cicadas outside in the big tree. The cicadas were big too and they were yellow and green, huge shiny green eyes and they were pretty in a way, too, kind of like butterflies. *Now, they don't just come out every year like this*, Jim told her, turning a page in the book, *they came here just for you*. It was a really special year.

Christ it was too fucking sweet. It really made Billy want to fuckin' cry; he wasn't being sarcastic in his head. To hear the chief say that corny shit to her was like a real private thing or something.

It was a really special year. Jim was starting to think she was safe and she *felt* safe too even though sometimes she got too confused and twice she'd woke up and she hadn't been in the house. He let her go out sometimes; he took her to the skating rink four times and once he took her to a big big mall that was three hours away so they could be sure no one who might have seen those pictures the Bad Men had sent around would be there to see her.

It was a really special year. The arcade with Mike and Dustin and Lucas and they were so excited to show her all the games; she was excited too even though everything was a little too loud and the flashing lights were so bright. Mike's smile was so bright looking at her, made her feel dizzy-crazy. He was so tall now. She went to the diner two times and Max had even sneaked her into the five-and-dime once and they'd bought a magazine full of pretty dresses so she could look at it; it cost Max all her money. They looked at lipsticks too; Max had thought about hawking one for each of them but Jim gave 011 an allowance so they just bought them. Max said if her brother Billy was here he would have hawked them for her or made a big scene about something so that Max could take 'em without the checkout girl noticing. *Bitchin'*; Max had laughed. But then Max had to go home and they rushed back to the diner so that Jim could get

her. Max said she had to wait for Billy to come pick her up and he was always late.

Mike and Lucas and Dustin hated Billy but Max didn't hate Billy; he was her brother. 011 looked at Max and she could SEE it without meaning to. She didn't understand how she could see it; usually she had to try really hard. Max was scared of her stepdad but she wasn't scared of Billy. Two weeks ago her stepdad had broken Billy's arm; one week ago Max had come home late from a movie with the guys – 011 hadn't been allowed to go. Max's stepdad had grabbed her arm REALLY HARD and Billy was on the couch watching cartoons and he said *Dad, come on*. He'd said *Jesus get the fuck off her* and stood up; maybe Billy still liked Max a little even though she had been so horrible and she'd tattled on him. 011 couldn't see what she had told. Billy lied for Max and said *I forgot to pick her up* and his dad had beat him *really bad* right in front of her.

It made 011 feel *really bad* too and she didn't understand. She didn't think mommies and daddies were supposed to hit you; she understood now that Papa wasn't really good but he had never hit her. *Jim* would never hit her. Maybe Max could come and stay with her and Jim, Billy too, even though she hadn't met him yet.

Shit. Max. Everything was so fuzzed up and Billy could barely remember what fuckin' day it was; he hadn't thought about Max in a while. He didn't want to think about all that shitty stuff from last year and he wouldn't have let her hawk a fucking lipstick anyway; Jesus what did she think of him. That'd been *one time* so they could get slushies when he'd left his wallet at home.

Christ. Shit. Max. He couldn't remember the last time he'd really thought about her, had to have been a whole day.

She was gonna be so pissed off at him if he ever got out of this; she was gonna be pissed off to holy hell and back. If these guys didn't just up and kill him or if his fucking arm didn't rot right off Max was gonna fucking murder him if she ever saw him again. She was gonna be so mad; she'd think he'd ditched her. She was the same as Billy even if she thought he didn't think it; she was always waiting for people to fuck off on her. She was gonna be so mad at him.

She won't be too mad! Elijane (011 – she needed to cut it out with that shit) yelped in his head. *She won't be too mad.* Billy noticed she didn't say anything about his arm. She said *Max will be so happy to see you and you can make up with Steve and we could all go to your apartment –*

Fuck. Christ. Jesus she was such a little kid; she really thought shit was going to be alright. She was so fucking weird all the time and she'd been through all this shit so sometimes Billy really forgot that she was just a goddamn little girl. She really thought that he could just make up with Steve; Billy knew she'd seen him with Nancy too and she still fucking thought he could make up with Steve.

He couldn't make up with Steve. He'd thought maybe he could before but now he definitely thought he couldn't. That seemed so stupid now. Jesus Christ Steve must be so pissed at him if he'd gone and decided to go back with Nancy Wheeler; Billy'd really almost believed him all the times he'd said he hadn't wanted her. He must be so pissed and he must not even be thinking about Billy if he'd gone back with her like that.

Billy hadn't thought that Steve would be that stupid. He had to know that Nancy wasn't really good for him; he'd even *said it* before. Then again it wasn't like Billy was good for him either so what the fuck did it matter now.

It was just that. Shit. It was just that Billy really *was* that stupid. He couldn't believe that he'd gotten Steve so pissed off at him; he didn't know why he'd done that, said all that shit.

The thing was that Billy had actually been letting himself get real stupid about Steve. He'd thought they were gonna have a real good summer. He'd really thought that; he was waiting for it. He was gonna have his apartment and he was gonna have Max *and* Steve and he'd said to Steve before *you can stay over all the time* and Steve had said *yeah that'd be nice*. Billy wouldn't even fucking mind getting up early for work or whatever if it meant that Steve was gonna be there in his apartment in the morning.

Steve. Steve Steve Steve. Shit. He remembered that El had thought how she'd seen Steve thinking *Billy Billy Billy*. God Billy was so dumb, so fucking dumb. Steve had wanted him to go to the fancy party in

July that his moms threw and he had said that last year all the little brats had made a fucking mess of his whole yard and fucked up his pool; he said he wasn't doing that shit again. He had said *Maybe we can take 'em to the community pool or somethin'* like Billy was really part of it and Billy'd said okay. Steve had said maybe they could go camping and he'd said that he would take Billy and Max to fuckin' Lake Michigan; he'd been making all these goddamn plans with Billy in them and Billy'd really believed him. He'd believed him and he'd wanted all those things and he'd just totally fucked it up and thrown all this shit away in five minutes because he'd gotten real scared. He didn't even know why he'd gotten real scared or why he'd gotten real mad; it didn't seem to matter now.

He closed his eyes again. He was real tired, tired of thinkin' of all that shit. Seemed like he hadn't been doing much of anything but he was so tired. El was still talking and going on but he fell asleep anyway.

Another day passed – another day, two days, he didn't really know. He kept coming in and out. He thought maybe he'd dreamed some of it and it wasn't real. Maybe nothing was real anymore and he'd actually fucking died already or something.

El said *I'm sorry, I took something from you* but he didn't know what that meant and he didn't know when she'd said it. Maybe before, maybe a while ago. She said a lot because she was always there. He was real tired but she kept him company; he was glad for her. She said he was keeping her company too. It was this real emotional shit.

You always make fun of everything.

Billy didn't understand why Max and Steve and Sue and everyone always thought he was just this huge fucking asshole that made fun of shit all the time. Maybe he *actually* had more than one fuckin' emotion in his life. He had like two or three. Maybe sometimes he *actually* meant shit he said and tried to be nice; they just thought he was making fun. *No I don't.* He thought like a big baby, *You should know that.*

She didn't say whether or not she knew that. He could feel her thinking of what to say, could see her biting her bottom lip upstairs wherever she was.

It was too weird that he could see her too. She wasn't exactly in a honeymoon suite either. She had a bed, though, a little cot. This ugly bear with stuffing coming out of it that was supposed to mean something to her. Her hair was matted and dull; usually it was real curly. Billy could only imagine what he looked like.

What book he did bring you? she asked him finally.

Billy didn't answer her for a few seconds. He thought that might have been a dream or something too. The fat fuck had came back in here two or three times since Billy had grabbed him and slugged him; Billy didn't know why he would do that so it must have been a dream. The fat fuck had a huge blue-black bruise on one eye, trailing down over his nose. Billy didn't know why he'd come back.

He'd brought Billy more food once or twice. Another water bottle with a weird label, a local company. He never said nothing. Billy had heard him once or twice, though, arguing with someone out in the hallway, probably the tall skinny guy from before that had tased him. After the yelling he'd always come in. He'd brought Billy another blanket because it was real cold down here. He'd brought him a book to look at.

Billy hadn't really looked at the book. He hadn't really eaten the food either and he hadn't really drank the water even though he knew he probably needed to. It was too hard to do anything and that was so stupid. He didn't know why he felt so weak and tired; he wasn't doing much of anything.

He was pretty tired and his head hurt a lot – like this dull pressure in the back of his neck. He was pretty sure he actually had a concussion, wondered if Steve had felt this way after Billy'd beat him. Made him feel like total shit to think that way. Steve.

His arm hadn't really bled bad for a day or two now. Maybe three. He didn't know what day it was. It hurt in a different way now, this deep throb that went down his whole body, felt like a web of pain. The

skin around the big cut by his collarbone was dark red and it hurt and felt hot to touch. When Billy had touched it all this gross puss had leaked out of it; that was bad.

Whenever he moved his arm or his shoulder or his neck the wrong way he'd get this weird stab going through his whole left side, felt like sick in the back of his throat. Made it real hard to breathe. He was pretty sure it was infected with something; he couldn't remember what it was called. Like gangrene but not gangrene, something like that. Hank had said he'd had two friends who'd died of it in Vietnam. *You gotta be careful, Bill, I knew a guy who lost both his legs. You think you just got a scrape and then it's all over in about a week.*

Shit. It was probably all over for Billy. Even if it wasn't all over he was pretty sure he'd lost his fucking job at least. He needed that job. He'd never called out before and now it had to be three or four days and he hadn't even shown up. Hank was probably pissed off or – even worse – he might be worried. That made Billy feel like total shit too, thinkin' about Hank waiting on him. He'd used to think Hank was for shit.

Elijane didn't want him to feel like total shit. *What book did he bring you?* she asked again.

Some HG Wells novel. Billy'd read all that shit when he'd been about twelve.

She didn't really know what that was; Billy thought she might like it. *Oh.*

He guessed they were having another conversation. *You go in your creepy bath yet?*

Yes. I tried to find Jim. There was a really long blank silence here where she didn't say anything; Billy knew she was thinkin' so he just waited. *I can't wait that much longer. You're really sick.*

I'm okay.

They said that if I open the gate they'll let us go. They said if I do it today they'll let us go. They are coming now.

Billy didn't really think they would let them go. He was so tired of being in here though and thinking of everything – thinking of Steve and Max and Tracey and Hank and El and how he couldn't help her. He felt this hot rush against his eyes; he was pretty sure he'd even cried down in here once or twice like a fucking baby.

Maybe you should just do what they want.

He could feel her anger like a wave over him; he could feel her power, locked up inside of her. It wasn't really gone. It was enormous, bigger than the whole state. She had so much power; she was the monster. In that moment she terrified him. *I WON'T do what they want!*

She could feel his panic and ebbed back. Billy swallowed and looked up at the ceiling. He looked out the little window. *What are you gonna do?* She didn't answer him. *What are you gonna do?*

Long silence. He almost thought maybe she'd gone away or something, but she'd been there with him the whole time – he knew she was tryin' to trick him. He could still feel her. She knew something that he couldn't see. *You should do what they say.* Maybe she didn't want to leave him alone or something. Maybe she thought they'd kill him. That was okay. *Just say you'll do what they want.*

They're here. Then someone said *You should go to sleep* . That wasn't Jane.

He could see them in the room with her – that white-haired guy and his other goons and that tall skinny fucker that Billy wanted to kill; Elijane could feel that too. Everyone was there except for the fat fuck who'd brought Billy that food and that blanket. He wasn't too important. That little girl was there, too; Billy suddenly understood that she'd been the one talking to him before. She'd made him go to sleep so they could take the kid. Her feet were dirty and she was lookin' at El. She had all her power. She didn't know what was going to happen, either. El knew though. She'd figured it out.

The white-haired guy was real close to El; he touched her face. He said *Are you ready?*

Billy could feel her fear, a whole floor beneath her; it poured out of her. He didn't know how he knew he was beneath her. He could see everything now too. He could almost see what she'd figured out. *Say you'll do it.* She could still be okay.

El said okay. The white-haired man smiled. He was still touching her face. He didn't even look over his shoulder. He was so happy; he was so pleased. He said, *get rid of her* .

There was this pause like everything stopped – Billy's whole mind went blank – and then someone's neck snapped. Billy felt it in his head and for a moment he thought he was paralyzed or dead; he was pretty sure his heart skipped two whole beats.

He felt this horrible surge of energy go through him – it ripped through the whole building, felt like the taser hitting him. It knocked him the fuck out. Before it knocked him the hell out he heard Elijane screaming.

After a long time he opened his eyes; he wasn't dead. He was still laying in front of the little window. He moved and tried to sit up. Someone was talking to him. It was the fat fuck again; he had a lot of blood on him. "I'm going to get you out of here," he said – maybe he said; Billy didn't know. Everything was too fuzzy and it was like his eyes couldn't work properly. Mouth couldn't work either; he wanted to say *Get the fuck off of me.*

His arm throbbed like a motherfucker but he managed to push himself up, didn't want the guy to touch him. "Where's the kid?"

The guy stared at Billy; his beady eyes were small in his sweaty pig-face. "She," he said. "There's not – "

"What you do to her?"

"I'm not going to hurt you, I swear I just wa – " he said and then his whole head exploded. There was a loud sound but maybe that came before.

Everything froze for a few seconds; when it started moving again

Billy wiped some gore out of his eyes. Holy shit. Okay that was part of a brain.

Hopper was there in front of him. Billy was pretty sure this was a dream, some kind of nightmare. He had a lot of blood on him too; his brown police suit was mostly maroon. Billy watched him put his pistol in the holster on his hip. The gun was actually smoking; was like in the movies. Hopper's lips moved. *Jesus **Christ*** . He said *Kid, I got you* .

Billy didn't really understand what was happening. It couldn't be real. He kept feeling that snap and hearing that scream.

Hopper got him up and then they were moving down the hall; everything spun. Billy nearly fell over twice. Hop had his arm around him like Billy was a little baby. The sun was too bright and it hurt his eyes. He saw weird faces swirling around him, didn't understand it.

He saw Joyce Byers' big eyes about four inches away from him. Her eyes were so fucking big; she looked like a moth. He thought she touched his head, the side of his face. Her pretty lips moved, *Oh my god, oh my god* . She couldn't really be here – he had to be dreaming. Joyce was a real pretty lady but he didn't exactly dream about ladies too much so it didn't make sense. She touched his arm too and that burned. *There's so much blood!*

Yeah. Some of it's his , Hopper said. *Hey, hey. Don't touch him too much.* He sounded like he was underwater; they all did.

Someone else was talking now. Wheeler Jr's huge scared face was peering at him and he wondered if he was actually in hell. Wheeler said, ***OH MY GOD, WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIS ARM?***

Calm down , Hopper said. *Just help me get him in the truck.*

They put him in the Jeep; felt like it took about an hour for him to climb in. He saw Wheeler's face looking at him like a nightmare. ***IS HE GOING TO DIE?***

STOP SCREAMING! said Hop; his voice sounded loud and scared too. ***JUST KEEP HIM FROM MOVING, ALL RIGHT?***

Billy tried to ask about the kid. Wheeler should be with her so she must not be there. He couldn't see her. He couldn't feel her anywhere either and he felt frantic; she was always there. He tried to speak and his mouth wouldn't move. He made some sound low in the back of his throat. Wheeler said in a panic, *UH, HOPPER, HE'S BLEEDING ON ME!*

They drove over the curb and Wheeler jostled against him; Billy's whole left side exploded in a sick pain. He saw white-white and then black. Mike was still hollering. Everything faded out again.

When it faded back in they were gettin' him out of the car. Someone's big hand on the back of his neck, guiding him. Couldn't walk, almost fell down twice. The parking lot stretched on forever and the sun was still too bright. Into another building, white-and-yellow hallways and a big front desk. Pretty lady in white scrubs; her eyes got real big. Her lips were moving. They were in a hospital. Hopper said, "You're fine." He was speaking actual real words now.

"Where's she at?" Billy said. He was speaking actual real words too.

"She's fine. She's with Joyce." How could she be with Joyce; that didn't make any sense. He had to see the kid.

Billy's arm hurt. They put him onto a gurney and he thought he actually screamed, twisted his shoulder the wrong way. *Don't move him!* Someone put something over his face. Someone said, "Oh, Jesus, that looks bad." Bright lights; he felt like Jane at the arcade. They asked him if he knew where he was and he said yes even though he didn't. They asked him if he knew what had happened to him and he said no even though he did.

Someone said, "We have to take you into surgery. We have to do something about your shoulder." They said, "Count back from ten for me." Billy tried to say he needed to see the kid but then everything hurt too much again. He could still hear that scream in his head.

He woke up a couple times or maybe he didn't; he couldn't remember. The room he was in was all dark and his shoulder and his chest *burned* and he felt too hot and then too cold and then too hot. His head hurt. It felt like he was dreaming; everyone's faces looked too big. He had a big bandage on his shoulder now and it felt too tight.

He was definitely in the hospital; doctors and nurses kept coming in and asking him stupid fucking questions. He remembered that shit from bein' with his mom. Shit like what year it was, what town he was from and if it was night or day. He kept closing his eyes over them and it felt like he was in a big bubble. He couldn't breathe right, whole body shook when he took a big breath. It felt like they asked him stuff for a long time.

He opened his eyes once and it was still dark but there was light now coming in from behind the heavy curtains on the window. No one was talking now. It took him a few seconds to think to look around. Someone said *Billy* so he turned his head.

His mom was sitting in the little chair next to him. It couldn't really be his mom so he must be dreaming. Maybe he was dead too. That'd be okay. She was wearing his Led Zeppelin t-shirt; he hadn't had that when she'd been alive.

Everything was fuzzy still but her pale face was white like the moon when the sky was real clear. She scraped her chair over even closer to him; she seemed so much smaller than he remembered. His big hand swallowed hers. He said, *I fucked it all up* . He said, *I can't ... I can't ...* He didn't remember what he wanted to say. He talked to her for a long time, until his voice was hoarse. He had so much stuff to tell her; how was he supposed to remember it all? Had to say it before she went away again. She said *It's okay, Billy, you're okay . I'll stay here with you. I can stay*. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

When he woke up again it was nighttime for real and the room was even darker than before. He felt so cold and his shoulder fucking *hurt* ; the pain sung through his whole body. He laid there for a long time listening to the machines beeping and watched the nurses move past the big window. He couldn't remember what was real and what was a dream anymore. That wasn't really his mom, couldn't be. Who had

it been?

He felt so cold and he couldn't stop shaking. He laid still for a long time, feeling the pain ripple through his arm every time he'd inhale; it felt like fire even though he was so cold. He still hadn't seen Elijane and he couldn't feel her anywhere. She wasn't in his head anymore and it was kind of lonely. He wanted the kid and he wanted his *sister* ; he wanted his *mom* . He didn't want to be in here.

A nurse came in with her clipboard, a big shadow in the light of the opened door. He remembered her big pretty face from before. She said, "Oh, you're awake!" Didn't sound like she was underwater anymore. Her voice sounded nice.

Billy swallowed; he felt his throat click. His mouth felt dry. "Somebody in here before?"

"Yeah, you have a lot of people waiting to talk to you," she said; that was so great.

"I wanna see my sister."

"She was in here earlier. You were sleeping, it's three in the morning. You should have rang for me if it hurt like this."

Billy didn't know what she was talking about. She gave him a shot of something that made his arm stop hurting. He floated above his body for a while and then went back to sleep.

He came back to himself after a long time and it felt like a heart attack; they were going to hit his car. He tried to sit up and his whole body screamed. Everything spun. He needed to see Jane. They were going to take her. He wasn't going to go to sleep this time.

"Kid, you're okay." Someone was talking to him.

He turned his head and it was the chief sitting in the little plastic chair next to him; Billy almost fell out of the bed. Holy shit Hopper was going to kill him. He tried to get up again and nearly screamed when he put too much weight on his arm.

"Hey, HEY! No, no, I said you're OKAY, don't try to move!" Hopper

was in his brown police uniform; there wasn't blood on it now. He looked weirdly alarmed and almost stood up – Billy waited for him to stuff the pillow over his face and suffocate him.

Hopper didn't suffocate him. He shifted in the little chair and stared at him real intense. He kinda looked like a cartoon ranger like on *Yogi Bear* or something. "Do you know where you are?"

People kept asking that. Billy stared back at him; he didn't understand why Hop wasn't killing him. He could do it real easy right about now.

His heart felt about in his throat, pounding too hard, and he couldn't answer for a few seconds, had to swallow it down. "I, uh, I – "

"Kid. Calm down."

He was calm. "M'sorry," he croaked out. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take her, I didn't mean to take her – "

"Hey. I said you're okay."

"They took her from me. I didn't mean to let 'em take her."

Hopper just looked at him. "I know that," he said. "Do you remember me getting you? Do you know where you are?"

Where the fuck was he supposed to be. "She okay?"

"I'm asking about you."

Get rid of her. "Where's she at?"

Hop stared at him some more. "Listen to me, Jane's fine," he said slowly. "She's here too, you guys are in a hospital in Hamilton. She's in the kid's wing, she's okay."

"I didn't mean to take her. I picked her up. I was gonna take her back."

"Listen, she told me everything already. You're okay."

“M’sorry – “

The chief stared at him; he was obviously here for a reason. Billy tried to sit up again. Hop pushed him back down with a hand against his chest; it hurt.

“ *Stop moving* – ” He made the face that made him look like a bear. “You know they told me you ripped your IV out like four times, you’re going to go into cardiac arrest or some shit. You need to calm the fuck down for a *single minute* . Can you do that?”

Billy licked his lips. He felt real tired from trying to sit up, almost couldn’t talk again. “Yeah.”

Hopper hunched forward and rested his head in his hands, elbows perched on his knees.

He had a weird look on his face, looking at Billy. He didn’t look mad and Billy didn’t understand why he didn’t look mad. He should be killing him. He could take him to jail. “Listen, nobody’s mad at you, all right? I need you to calm down. Everything’s over now, you’re okay.”

“Don’t feel okay.”

“Yeah, you’re pretty fucked up, actually. Anyone come in and talk to you yet?”

“Don’t remember.”

“Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t.” He rubbed his beard. “What do you remember?”

Billy tried to think. “I was with the kid.”

“You remember your car? They hit your car.”

“Yeah.” He definitely remembered that. “They took her from me. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. I got her. You got really fucked up, the doctor told me you have a pretty bad concussion, you might not remember

everything. Maybe that's better. Messed your shoulder up pretty good, you remember that?"

He remembered that too. "Got glass in it. Hurts," Billy said like a little kid.

Hopper had a weird look on his face, like he was in pain too or something. Billy realized that he looked sorry for him. It was totally weird. "Yeah, I bet it does," Hop said in a muted voice. "It got infected, turned septic. You know what that is? But we got you here, they think we got you here early enough. They said you'll probably be okay. Actually you're really lucky, if you wanna believe that."

Billy didn't answer him for a few seconds. He still felt this kinda crazy panic and he didn't know why Hop wasn't killing him. "Don't feel lucky."

"Yeah," Hopper said in the weird voice again. "Yeah, I feel you."

He couldn't talk again. He was starting to feel way too dizzy, like how he'd been when his mom had been in here. He tried to swallow and his throat felt like sandpaper. "You gonna book me now?"

Hop stared at him. "What?"

"Because I took her. I didn't mean to. Sorry."

Hopper stared at him. And stared at him and stared at him. Billy said, "I tried to –"

"Okay, no," Hopper said. "Listen, I told you you're okay. This isn't your fault, this is something that happened to you. Are you hearing me?"

"Shoulda taken her home, I'm sorry –"

"No. They were going to take her," Hopper cut him off. "Listen to me. This is my fault. I'm sorry. You understand me? You're not in trouble."

"I took her –"

"She's okay, listen to me, she's fine. She told me everything. She showed me everything. Do you know how glad I am that someone was with her? Do you know how glad I am that you were with her?"

Billy stared at him.

Hopper rubbed his beard again. "Yeah, I know. That's pretty fucked up, isn't it? You're okay, though. These people, I think they were following her for a long time."

Billy cleared his throat. "I seen that car before. I shoulda told you."

"That's okay."

"Said they took her powers."

"Yeah, well. She got them back." His lips were pressed tight together.

Get rid of her. His eyes flooded over. His body felt too hot; he was gonna fucking piss himself and puke and cry. He felt that snap in the back of his brain, was like when he'd broke his arm. "There was, ah – did you see – you see – the girl?" Hopper didn't answer him so Billy tried again; his voice wobbled like a fucking baby's. "That little girl."

Hopper stared at him for a long time like his face was frozen. He looked at him for so long that Billy wondered if his brain had glitched out or something. Maybe he was still talkin' in his head like he'd been talkin' to Jane. "Yeah. I saw her."

"Where's she at?"

Hopper didn't answer him so Billy asked again. "You get the girl?"

He didn't answer him again. He rubbed his beard. "Yeah. Yeah, I got the girl," he said in a weird voice.

"She okay?"

"No. She's dead." He kept rubbing his beard. "They snapped her neck."

Billy stared at him.

"I don't know who she was. I'm trying to find out. Some other kid, some other experiment. I don't know who she was. I don't know how they got her." Billy didn't answer him. "Listen, I don't want you to think about that right now," Hopper told him. "You got people here who want to see you."

Billy tried to clear his throat; it didn't really work. "Police?"

"No, you – " Hopper stared at him again with this weird look on his face. He was looking like Billy was totally dumb. "I got – no, your *family's* here. Maxine, your stepmom. Your father was here last night, let me say he is a fucking piece of work – "

"My dad's here?" He felt this creeping fear attacking his brain. He might die today after all.

"No. No, he's not here right now. Do you know what day it is?"

Billy stared at him so Hopper told him, "It's Saturday morning."

That didn't make any sense. Saturday was – Christ his brain was too foggy. Max had had to work on Saturday; she'd been bugging him in his room. She'd said *make good eye contact!* He'd went to Steve's on Saturday. Seen Steve, seen Nancy. Big freakout in his car, almost hit the neighbor. He'd seen Jane, walking in the rain. Made her step in that huge puddle. He'd gone –

The chief was looking at his face. "You were gone for a week, kid," he told him softly. "I brought you in here yesterday, you were in surgery. Maybe you don't remember. Maxine and your mom were here – "

"I saw Wheeler," Billy interrupted him. He couldn't remember when.

Hop rubbed his face. "Yeah. Yeah, he was there. Little shit hid in my Jeep for six hours, he about suffocated in my damn trunk."

"How'd you find us?"

He leaned back in the little chair. "You want the long or short version?"

“Uh. Dunno if I can really handle the long version right now.”

“Right. Okay.” Hopper’s mouth twisted up on one side for a second. “We didn’t know where you guys were at first. El got in touch with Mike, she did her – ” he made a sound and touched the side of his head – “you know, her *mind thing* – “

“Yeah.”

“She showed him where you guys were. Kinda. She sent me an address a day or two later, part of one. She told me she saw that from you.”

Billy didn’t really remember seein’ any address; he didn’t know why he would have. “She kept, uh, goin’ in my head. She’s real nosy.”

Hopper looked like he’d said something funny. “Yeah, you don’t even know,” he said. Then he said, “I thought I might know who took you guys. Do you know who took you?”

Hop was definitely a policeman; he kept asking these real stupid questions. “Lab people,” Billy said. “She showed me.”

“Yeah. Lab people.” He leaned back in the little chair and it squeaked dangerously. “Your boy said something that made me start thinkin’,” he said; Billy didn’t really know what he was talking about. “I started checking out people from the old facility again. There was this guy who worked closely with Martin Brenner back in the 70s, turns out he bought an industrial property about a year and a half ago. Real convenient. Building number matched up. I had to – “ He looked at Billy’s face. “Okay, you don’t care. So I went there, there you guys were. Think I came in right after all the shit went down.” He looked at him again. “You threw up in my Jeep,” he said slowly.

“Don’t remember that. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. Look, yesterday was a mess, it’s probably better you were knocked out. Your stepmom and your sister were in here, you remember that?” Hopper asked him. Billy didn’t remember that so he didn’t answer him.

Hopper shifted in the little chair again. “Had about eighty annoying

kids here after nine o'clock. Out in the hall, I mean." He looked up and right at him. "Steve was here," he said; every cell in Billy's body froze. "I feel bad, I got him all crazy. I made him come here. You're in the ICU, I wasn't thinking. They only let family in here."

I made him come here. Fuck. "I, uh – "

"Bet he'll be back in a day or two to kiss your face, don't worry 'bout it. I just needed to talk to you first. You're gonna be okay. Your family wants to see you, they want to know what happened to you. I need to know what you're gonna tell them."

Hopper was just looking at him and Billy didn't know what was going on. The chief had this weird intensity in his eyes. "You can tell them the truth, if you want," he said slowly. He rubbed his beard again. "It's gonna make things harder for us, though."

He didn't really understand at first, and then he did. For us. Jane. Hop meant for Jane and him. Jane. They weren't supposed to know about her. He closed his eyes. "Kid's okay?"

"What, Maxine? She's fine."

"I – " Max too. Shit. Max. "Your kid."

Hopper stared at him blankly; Billy didn't know why. He said, "You asked me that already. Do you remember that?"

"She okay?"

"Yeah. Eleven's okay. You don't have to worry about her. I'll handle it."

"Where's she at?"

"She's in the – "

"Those guys. Where are they at?"

"Don't worry about them. They're gone."

Billy closed his eyes. "Did you get 'em?"

"I didn't really have to. She killed them. Well, she killed four, then I shot the guy that was with you."

"Okay." He didn't open his eyes.

"I just need to know – "

"Are there more?"

"I don't think so," Hopper said slowly. "Not yet."

"What you do with 'em?"

The chief didn't answer him for a long time. "I'm taking care of that," he said, still slowly. "Listen, don't worry about that. Your stepmom really wants to see you, your sister wants to see you. She's been raising holy hell at the nurses' station since eight o'clock this morning. I had to sneak by her."

His eyes flooded over again; he couldn't take it. His face felt too hot and his eyes burned when he closed them. Max was gonna be so mad at him again – she was gonna think he'd left her. He could see her red little face, didn't know if he could handle her yellin' at him right now. Susan. If she knew he ran off and took some kid. "Uh – I can't – " He thought he was crying, fucking baby.

There was this weird pressure on his forearm; after a moment he realized Hop had grabbed it. "Yes, you can," he said. "You're okay. Nobody's mad at you."

"I can't – "

"Nobody's mad at you. This is just something that happened to you." He kept saying that. Maybe he thought Billy needed it. He said, "They just want to see ya, kid."

Billy couldn't talk for a few minutes, then he could. "Okay," he said.

"I just need to know what you're going to say. I can make some kinda report, or, you can tell your stepmom the truth. I've got Jane right here, she can't leave yet."

“S’wrong with her?” God she’d probably blown her own fucking brains out doing whatever it had been that she’d done.

“Nothing, I don’t – “ He paused. “Okay, I shouldn’t say nothing. I think she’s okay. After she – you know, she was bleeding a lot. They wanted to do an EEG on her, so she has to stay a couple days too. Funny thing, she’s showing a lot of unusual brain activity. You believe that?”

Billy was too tired to be funny or make a joke back. People liked it when you did that but he couldn’t do it right now. “Yeah, I believe that. What’re they gonna do with her?”

“Nothing, I don’t – I mean, she’s fine. They’re gonna release her tomorrow, maybe Monday or Tuesday. She wants to see you too. But I need to know what you want to tell them. She came in with Joyce, so. They don’t know yet.”

He remembered Mrs. Byers’ face; her big eyes like a moth looking up at him. She’d been there too. He didn’t know how. “They don’t know she was with me?”

“No. Not yet. Said a friend was, uh, babysittin’ her.”

Babysitting. It was almost too much. Billy closed his eyes again. “Okay,” he said.

“Okay?” Hopper repeated. Billy could tell he was staring at him again.

“Yeah, okay. I don’t remember.”

“Look, kid, I just need to know – ”

“They don’t know those people took her, they don’t know who she is, I don’t remember shit, all right?” Billy told him. “Can you make something up?”

Hopper stared at him once more, for a long time.

“Yeah, I can make something up,” he said finally. He shifted over and put his head in his hands again, still looking at Billy. “So what you

want to do? I'll let you pick," he said. "You wanna get car-jacked, or maybe you wanna get robbed? Maybe you, uh. Fought the wrong person last month or something."

"Okay," Billy said. He opened his eyes again. "Hey, not just one guy, okay? I fought off like four people. All right?"

Hopper made this weird sound that was almost a laugh. "Okay, yeah, you fought off four guys. Somebody had a grudge or something. Wanted your money?"

"Yeah. My head hurts. Can't, uh. Remember faces." He let his eyes close again. "I was real brave, okay?"

"Sure. You were real brave, kid," Hop repeated. After a moment: "They take anything off you?"

Billy remembered what he'd been missing; he reached up and touched his throat with his good hand. He felt really shaky again. "Uh. Yeah. My necklace," he managed. "Had this pendant from my mom."

Hopper didn't answer him for a long time again; Billy wondered what kind of face he was making. Stupid, shouldn't have said anything. "Gold or silver?"

"Gold. Silver chain."

"Right. Okay. Well, I – " There was another silence and then the little plastic chair squeaked; Hop was standing up. "That's all I need from you, then. Give you a couple minutes and then I'm sending 'em in, okay?"

Billy cleared his throat, two times. "Okay."

"You'll be okay, kid," Hop told him. "You did real good, all right?"

Billy didn't answer him. He was gonna open his eyes in a second, he told himself. He fell asleep instead. When he woke up it was dark again. He laid there for a while until his eyes adjusted, reached up with his good arm to rub his neck.

Max's huge face was about four inches away from him; Billy almost screamed. "BILLY?" she yelled her head off like a crazy person and he wanted to cry. "ARE YOU AWAKE?"

Billy took a moment so he wouldn't fucking cry. "Yeah, m'awake."

"DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?"

"Jesus." He closed his eyes. "Max, stop fuckin' yelling at me."

"Oh my *god*." She flopped back into the chair beside his bed. "Are you OKAY?"

"Think so."

"Do you remember last night? You were *super* messed up. You thought I was your mom," Max told him.

Oh. That made sense. That was so fucking embarrassing. "Sorry," he croaked.

Her eyes were so big. "Are you okay?" she asked again in a little voice.

"Think so," Billy said again. She'd asked him that already; he wondered how many times they were gonna do this.

Max just stared at him. She was still wearing the Def Leppard shirt and her hair was all messy, pulled back in a ponytail. He'd forgot how skinny she was. Her little face looked so sweet; Billy about cried again. Holy hell he must be on so many drugs. "Max. I'm sorry."

Her eyes got even bigger, all alarmed. "Oh! No, that's – okay, Billy! It's not –"

"I was gonna come back." His face felt too hot again. "I'm sorry. I fucked it up again."

Max's face turned red and she started crying which was always awful. "Don't do that, man," Billy begged her.

"I thought you were *dead*!"

“M’sorry.”

“Your face is so fucked up,” Max wept at him. “I thought you were gonna die!”

Billy rubbed his neck. “Like you’d get that lucky,” he said; that made her cry even harder which wasn’t what he’d meant to do.

Max cried for *forever* – for almost ten minutes. She even held his hand like they was in a Lifetime movie; that was okay. He looked at their hands, her little one and his all bruised up from the IV. Whatever they were giving him felt real good – he felt like four or five emotions instead of his usual two to three. “Hey. I’m really sorry.”

She wiped her snotty face. “That’s okay!”

“I was gonna come back.”

“I know!”

“Where’s my – ” He tried again, didn’t want to ask about his dad. “Where’s your mom?”

“Oh! She – ” She wiped her face some more. “S...sorry, she had to go to work. She called out for two days, but she had to go in. Hopper is gonna take me home.” Billy wondered if he could ask about Jane without her gettin’ all worked up; Max started talking again before he had to. “El tried to get in here earlier, she made it all the way past the ICU desk. That blonde nurse is *really* scary. El’s okay. And I have stuff for you, if you – want it. Do you feel okay?”

Billy felt like he’d taken about eighty Percocets; he felt okay. “Think so.”

“Well I got – ” she shifted in her chair and pulled her huge old green backpack up onto her lap; she was still sniffing – “well it’s late. But I brought some of your stuff. I got your books, if you want them. Um, we brought you food, but they said you can’t have any yet, so Dustin and Bev ate it.”

Jesus Christ. “They were in here?”

“No. Well they tried, too.” Max rolled her eyes. “I brought, um, I didn’t think you’d want – Lucas brought you these comics.” She waved them in his face; *Black Panther* . Of course. “But you don’t have to read – ”

“Was supposed to give him a ride. Sorry.”

Max stared at him blankly for a moment. Then she said, “Oh. That’s okay. He’s not mad.” She stared at him some more. “No one’s mad, Billy.”

“I, uh – ”

“I talked to Hopper, he said we’re not supposed to ask you anything if you don’t want to talk about it. But they – ” Her little face crumpled again. “Your car got all smashed up. Hank said he fixed your windshield, did they *hit* you?”

Shit. “Yeah, they hit us. Am I fired?”

“Oh! No, Hank is really worried. I think he’s gonna – call you. I think Hopper told him that you got ran off the road, he said you beat up like four guys.”

Billy closed his eyes. “I didn’t beat nobody up.”

Max was quiet for a long time. Finally she said, “What did they do to you? What happened?”

He didn’t answer her for a while. He didn’t really want to tell her about the car crash and those people, the guns and the tasers. That stupid blanket and that book. The little girl. Jane crying. *I WON’T do what they want*. “Just threw me in a basement for a couple days.”

Max just stared at him. “Your shoulder got infected, you had a really bad fever,” she told him after a minute. “My mom was freaking out.”

“Sorry.”

“She’s gonna come back tomorrow, she wanted to be here in case you woke up again. She said she can bring you food.” Billy must have made some kind of face because she almost smiled. He saw her again

on her blades, skatin' in front of him and Tracey. She still looked the same, real little. "Yeah, I know. I said you were probably okay. And I _"

The phone rang on the little table next to them; they both jumped. Max was closer so she reached over and answered it. "Hello?" she said and then made a stupid excited face. "Hi! Yeah, he's awake. Hold on." She put her hand over the receiver in a dramatic way. "Um, it's ... Steve."

Billy froze up staring at her. He could Steve with his hand on Nancy's face; he saw his hand on her back as he led her up the steps. He didn't know why Steve would be callin' here for him. Maybe to scream at him for being so fucking stupid. He didn't say anything for a few seconds, felt like a long time.

Max's face froze up too looking back at him, then she frowned. "Don't you - " Billy shook his head.

Her face fell even more. *What? WHY?* she mouthed at him; she looked like she was about to shove the phone in his face.

God. Steve. Billy didn't know why he'd be calling; it didn't make any sense. Steve always got so pissed off when he talked about the kid and he hadn't wanted Billy to go off with her before. When they'd gone to see her moms. He probably knew it was all Billy's fault like usual. Billy said, "I can't."

Max just looked at him for a long time. Her big blue eyes searched his; it felt like he couldn't breathe again. She must have seen something, lookin' at him, because then her face changed. She put the phone back up to her ear.

"No, I'm here. Um ... he can't actually talk right now," she said in a weird voice. "Because he doesn't want to!" Her face changed even more. "Why do you *think*? " she asked. "Oh, I don't know! He doesn't feel good, Steve! He almost died like three times today!"

"I did?" Billy said like a moron. He hated her saying Steve's name, was like he was right there.

Max made a huge face at him. *No, dumbass!* she mouthed. She said into the phone, “I don’t know, I can’t make him do anything! Uh, I’m NOT! OKAY! Okay. Oka – oh, my god, I don’t know! I guess he did!” She was quiet for a long time. “Okay,” she said again. “Okay. Yeah, WELL, I’m sure that’s what you think but that’s not what he SAW – I’M NOT! I know. Yeah. I know! No, I – ”

She looked up and startled him; he’d just been watching her. “Steve *really* wants to talk to you,” she said.

Billy didn’t answer her so she put the phone back up to her ear.

“No, he doesn’t want to. No. No. Okay. I don’t know, he just woke up. YEAH, LET ME JUST PUT THE PHONE TO HIS EAR AND FORCE HIM AFTER HE JUST GOT BEAT UP FOR SIX DAYS!” She turned all red in two seconds. “I’m NOT!” she said. “Okay, *what?* ” she said again. She was quiet for a long time once more; her face twisted up and she looked sorry. “Okay, I will. I know. I know. Sorry. Yes, I’ll tell him. Okay, bye.”

She hung up the phone and stared at Billy.

Billy licked his lips. “You don’t gotta be a dick to him,” he managed finally.

“I’M NOT!” Max snapped all fired up. “You don’t even want to – “ she got a put-upon expression on her face and squared her little shoulders as if she was facin’ an execution sentence. “I have a message for you from Steve, will you accept the message?” she asked like Henderson.

Billy really didn’t want to hear the message. “I guess.”

“Okay. Ummm.” Now the put-upon expression turned into a weird one. “Did you see ... Steve and Nancy ... before?”

Steve and Nancy. Fuck. “Yeah. I saw them.”

“Oh. I knew it.” She was just looking at him. “Steve said he heard your car pull away.”

That was really great. Billy bet he’d loved that. He’d probably got a big kick out of it.

He didn't say anything so Max kept talking. "Um, Steve says he's glad you're okay, he was really worried about you. He says he wants to see you, he said he's sorry, and he said he ... didn't do anything with Nancy." She was looking at his face too much. "Do you believe him?"

Oh. Billy hadn't really thought that Steve would have been worried about him but now that he wasn't going out of his mind thinking about Max and Eliane and all that crazy shit he'd been thinking he guessed that made sense. He was being too big of a fucking asshole in his head; Steve was a real good guy like that. Maybe he was even sorry too for whatever he thought he needed to be sorry about. He always said sorry too much. "I saw 'em together," was all he said.

"Oh. Yeah." Max looked glum. "I mean, he ... said you broke up with him."

"Yeah. Guess I did."

She looked even more glum. "Well, he says he didn't bang Nancy! He said – oh. Ummmm," she said again. She chewed on her bottom lip which was what she did when she felt real guilty.

"What."

"Okay, DON'T FREAK OUT," Max told him. Billy prepared himself to freak out. "The thing is ... everyone ... kind of knows about you guys now. So. You don't have to hide it anymore."

Billy stared blankly. "Knows what?"

Max looked at him like he was dumb. "You and Steve!"

Oh. "Who knows?"

"Uh, just the guys. And – maybe Will's mom. Because he. Uh, well. But no one cares!" she told him all forceful. "Are you mad?"

He thought about it; he didn't feel mad. It was too stupid now, to be mad after he'd fucked everything up so bad. Didn't really seem important but it had been really important about two weeks ago. If he hadn't been such a prick. Now Steve had Nancy again. "Guess not."

Max was looking at his face too much again. "I really think you should talk to him," she said. "He ... has something for you."

Probably all the shit that Billy'd left at his house; maybe he'd put it in a trash bag. "Don't really feel like talkin' about this right now." He couldn't; it was too much.

"But he's really – "

"M'tired." He was, so tired, and his shoulder was starting to hurt again.

"Oh. Okay." She hunched her shoulders. "Do you want me to go?"

Billy really didn't want her to go. "Just stay for like a couple minutes."

"Okay!" She scraped her chair closer, happy again. Maybe not happy but okay. "Do you want to see the comics?"

"Yeah. Okay."

His fever came back pretty bad after Max left that night; Sunday was mostly a blur. Monday he got a little better again and they moved him to a regular room in the night-time. It was real fun when they pulled the catheter out of him. Pretty nurse said she'd never heard such creative swears.

Max and Susan had brought him some clothes finally; it took him about forty fucking minutes in the little bathroom to put them on. He kept getting too tired. The back of his neck felt cold; his hair had been so bloody and matted that the doctors had had to cut a lot of it off when they'd cleaned him up. Susan made him sit down and cut it some more until it was even; she said he looked okay. He couldn't really remember the first time she'd come in to see him but she'd cried too and that'd been awful. She hadn't really asked too many questions so he guessed Hopper had told her a real good story.

By Tuesday he felt a little better and he was allowed to actually move around without people screamin' at him too much. Not too much but it was still something. Elijane came in early in the morning and climbed right into the bed with him; that was real weird but he felt so glad to see her. He didn't even have to say nothing to her. She knew it all already.

He was so glad to see her. He thought she'd died but it had been that other little girl that had died. He hated that he felt glad it had been the other girl and not Jane. Billy kept thinking about her even though he didn't want to. He didn't think she'd even had a fucking name or nothing. Elijane didn't want to think about her either. He couldn't see what she was thinkin' anymore but there was this part of him that still felt like he could see what she was thinkin'.

Jane had gotten cleaned up too even though she was still in her blue hospital gown with the birds on it. Kids were lucky; theirs had backs to 'em. Her hair was washed clean now and it was real curly again. Billy played with it for a while and then thought probably he shouldn't do that; felt like a fucking fairy or something. Elijane put her little hand on his wrist though and that felt okay. He thought he needed to touch people more; he'd been trying to do that since he'd got back.

Max came back in once she was done with school and she brought her moms; Jane had left before Susan saw her. Max sat on his bed where Jane had been and Billy played with her hair too. She had real pretty hair like his mom had. Billy'd have to tell her. He loved girls' hair, loved Steve's hair too, not that he should be thinkin' about that. Tracey had taught him how to do a french braid back when he'd been about sixteen; Max kept squirming and yelling that he pulled too much. Tender-headed brat. She made him feel real okay. They watched Jeopardy on the TV and she and Susan kept sayin' all the wrong answers.

His arm was still hurting and he still got too tired too fast but Billy really did feel okay now and that meant he felt real bored. The nurse kept coming in and checking his shoulder and checking his head out and shit. Billy asked her when he'd be allowed to get up and walk around; Max said they had better food down in the cafeteria.

The nurse – pretty blonde lady; shit, he didn't even like blondes – was writing his stats down on her clipboard. “Not tonight, your blood pressure's still too low. You can't sit still, can you?”

Billy felt like a sulky bitch; Max flipped her braid into his face. The nurse gave him more pills to take.

He had fucking pills to take about every three hours it seemed. They had given him a buncha pain pills and some blood thing, had to take an antibiotic. They'd gave it to him in an IV until this morning. He had like a million infections; he had a kidney infection and he had to get up and piss about every hour. It was real fun.

Susan was sitting in the little chair by the TV, knitting and not paying any mind to him being a sulky bitch. “When they gonna let me out of here?” he asked her.

She continued to not pay him any mind; after five years she was real good at that. “When you feel better and they say you can go.”

“Feel like a million fuckin' dollars.”

She looked up sharply and gave him a huge death-glare; Max and Billy leaned back on the bed. “Don't *swear!* ” she told him all worked up. “I suppose you think this is funny. You could have died, you could have lost your arm! I guess you think *eighteen stitches* is funny.”

She looked truly terrifying; Billy felt like total shit. She'd helped the nurse change the bandage on his chest earlier. The scab was real ugly, a snarling twisted mouth of black-red going down into his shoulder. It hadn't been that big before but they'd had to slice into him to cut out some of the infected crap. Was all jagged and shit. He wished she hadn't seen that. “Sorry.”

Susan glared at him and went back to knitting and not paying him any mind.

Billy felt too restless; he'd been here for three or four days. He'd never been in the hospital for so long before. His old man was gonna kill him. “I don't think it's funny. Just mean I can't stay here much longer, 's too much money.”

“Well. That’s what insurance is for.” She kept on knitting.

Billy stared at her. He didn’t understand why she wasn’t flipping out too. “We ain’t got insurance.”

Susan stopped knitting for a second; she looked up at him with a confused frown. Her knitting needles glinted in the light of the TV. “What are you talking about? Of course we do.”

He felt totally blank. “No we don’t,” he said. She kept looking at him and he felt weird. He licked his lips. “My dad said before.”

Susan stared at him; she put her needles down. “Billy, your father’s insurance is about the ... only good thing about his job. I mean, he sells it. Of course we have insurance.”

Billy stared at her too. Susan stared back, for a long time. She said, “Did he tell you we didn’t have insurance?”

“We – ” Billy felt totally dumb. Max leaned up and was looking back and forth between them. “No, he said – I mean I seen the bills. Last year, for my arm. Came in the mail.” Both times.

“Yes, I ... “ Sue was lookin’ at him like he was totally dumb, too. “Billy, the hospital sends us a bill, and then they send a bill to the insurance company. And then the insurance company ... *pays* it.” She looked so confused. “Did your father tell you we didn’t have insurance? You’re on the plan until you’re twenty-one, I think. I know you were still on it after you turned eighteen.”

Billy didn’t say anything, for a long time too. Max burst out, “Mom, Billy’s been paying Neil for his arm all year!”

Susan totally froze staring at her. Billy felt like the biggest idiot. “You – what?” she said faintly.

“He gave him money every week!”

“ *What?*” Susan said again. She looked over at Billy; her eyes were wide.

“Yeah,” Billy said like a little idiot.

Susan didn't say anything. She pressed her lips together real tight; they turned white and almost disappeared. She put her hands together like she was prayin' and squashed them against her nose for a moment. She closed her eyes. Finally she said: "How much money did you give him?"

Billy didn't really know. He'd been giving his old man about half his checks for around six months, then after Hank'd started cuttin' em he'd still gave his dad twenty or thirty bucks a week. He hadn't even really counted it, all he'd given him. "Maybe like eight hundred." He was pretty sure it was more than that.

Susan just looked at him so Billy said, "Not all at once."

She stared at him some more. She looked totally blank. Two pink spots formed high up on her cheeks. "My dad ain't give you my money?" Billy asked her; his voice sounded strangely small against the loud sounds of the TV.

Susan just looked at him. Max looked at him too; she looked totally confused.

"No, Billy," Susan said softly. She was super red. "He didn't – give me your money."

Billy didn't say anything. He waited to get real mad but instead he just felt real stupid. His old man had yelled a lot about all their bills and told Billy that he was fucking everything up; he'd said *I don't know what kind of savings you think we have*.

He'd made Billy feel like total shit about it, getting hurt. Susan needed things, Max needed things. Billy'd thought he'd maybe been giving Susan some of the money, he had to be.

He wouldn't have minded payin' rent or nothing. He wasn't a total piece of shit like his dad thought, even though he *felt* like a total piece of shit. He'd have paid rent if Neil had asked; his dad didn't have to lie.

But Sue wouldn't lie to him, he didn't think. She was just looking at him and clutchin' her knitting needles like she was going to stab

something. He knew his old man hadn't given her any money.

He just felt totally stupid. "Okay," he said.

"I think you just bought your dad's beer and smokes for the last year," Max told him. She was so helpful.

Billy rubbed his face again. "Okay," he said again.

"Billy, I am so sorry," Susan told him. "I swear I didn't know this. We can get your money back. I'll talk to him. I'll –"

He almost laughed. "What, you think he's still got my money? He ain't got my fuckin' money."

She didn't say *don't swear*. "When you come home –"

"I ain't comin' home," Billy told her; Susan stared at him again.

It was the 16th of the month and he could've already got his place; shoulda moved in on the tenth. He'd called his landlady earlier to talk to her when Jane had been in here; she'd sounded kinda weirded out but she'd said he could still move in, of course. He'd already paid her so it wasn't like it was a problem. She had said Max could come and get the key. She'd asked what had happened to him. Probably thought he was some crazy junkie that just got jumped all the time now which was so great.

He'd called Hank too; it'd taken him about forty minutes to get Hank off the phone and half of that had been Billy tryin' to convince him that he didn't need to come up here. He still had his job; he didn't really know how. Even if he didn't have a job he'd just go and sleep in his busted up car.

Susan was still lookin' at him. She looked confused so Billy told her, "I got a place."

"Oh." Still blank. "I didn't know that."

"Got it last month."

"Oh." She just stared; Billy didn't know how she looked. "You could

have told me.”

“I ain’t want you to say nothin’ to my dad.”

Okay now he knew how she looked; she looked mad. “Do you think I would?”

“I – ”

“That’s okay, Billy. I understand.” She was gatherin’ up her knitting stuff and he felt like a total asshole. “I have to – go to – I have to do the night shift at the office. I took the night shift so I could be here. I’ll just go now. Um, I don’t want to be late.”

Shit. “Hey. Look, I’m sorry. I ain’t mean – “

“That’s okay, Billy. I just have to go.” She gave him the super mom glare even though she was still mad. “Do not go down to that cafeteria, I mean it. I will *know*. ”

“Fine,” Billy said like a sulky bitch. Max had said that they had cake down there.

She turned to Max. “Are you coming with me, or will Mr. Hopper take you home?” Hop had been lurking around for like three days; sometimes Billy saw him peeping in the window like a freakshow. He’d only come in once today with Elijane though.

“I can stay until Hopper wants to leave.”

“Okay.”

“Bye Mom.”

“Bye,” Billy said too. Susan didn’t answer him.

She left and Max turned back to him; she was sittin’ and taking up about half of his little bed. “You made her really upset.”

“Yeah, I know.” What else was new. “Didn’t mean to.”

“What are you going to about your dad?”

“The fuck can I do?”

“Billy! He took like a thousand dollars from you!”

Billy shrugged. “I got more. ‘Less he took that too.” He still had his shit in the bank. That was for rent though. He just wouldn’t have any furniture for like two months.

“Oh.” Max looked shiftily in two seconds.

“What, he took it?”

“No! Um – don’t get mad. Lucas has it!”

Billy stared blankly.

“He’s not going to spend it!” Max yapped. “We just – sorry, we ... went through your room. I swear he’s not going to take it, I HAVE YOUR WEED TOO! We’re keeping it safe.”

Jesus God she was too much. “Yeah, that’s okay.”

“What should I do with it? Do you want it? We can buy stuff for your place once you get out.” Sounded like he was in jail or something.

Billy shrugged. “You can just pick shit out with it.”

Max looked blankly over at him; she looked confused. “What, for your apartment? But – that’s your place! Don’t you want to pick it out?”

He shrugged again. It didn’t seem to really matter now. He felt this real hollow feeling thinkin’ about shit he didn’t want to think of. Steve had been all jazzed up about his place when Billy’d told him about it; he’d made Billy feel okay even though Billy’d been being a real asshole when his old man had said that shit to him about Maxine before. Steve had said *You should let me buy you something real nice for it, okay just one thing.*

Billy hadn’t really let himself think about it too much but he guessed he’d let himself think about it once or twice. He’d thought that maybe he and Steve could go together and get stuff for his place or

whatever. Well not that he would let Steve buy anything but he'd thought they could look together.

That really wasn't gonna happen now. He felt totally stupid. Max was still looking at him.

"Doesn't really matter."

She had a weird look on her face. "Oh, okay. Well, what about your stuff from home? How are you going to get it?"

"Don't really give a fuck about stuff from home."

"Are you really just gonna go to the apartment? Joyce said she can get you a cheap bed, she showed me these TVs before."

"I guess."

"Okay." She started getting a crazy gleam in her eyes; his apartment was going to look totally gay. "Don't we need a couch?"

Shit. Max thought she was so slick. "Listen. I swear to God, if you get that fuckin' red leather thing – "

"What?" She was ignoring him; she bounced off the bed finally. "I need a soda, do you want something?" She went off to the vending machine to get a Coke. Probably used his fucking money too.

After two more excruciating days he was finally gettin' to leave the hospital. Yesterday he'd finally been allowed to go down to the cafeteria with Maxine acting as his fucking chaperon; it was real fancy like she'd said. Sinclair had been with them and he'd actually been real okay with Billy. Billy said thanks for the comics; Sinclair said no problem.

Maxine had had a real attitude with him yesterday; he kinda wondered if it was her time of the month or something. She'd glared at him as they ate their overpriced cake.

"So you're actually getting out tomorrow, WHEN are you going to

talk to Steve?"

She'd been asking him about Steve about every goddamn day since Sunday. It was almost too much. Billy knew he had to say sorry still – he *knew* he had to do that – but he just couldn't think about it right now.

Maybe Steve'd been asking her about him or whatever. He probably felt real bad that Billy was all busted up. He could see Steve wanting to see him or something. It wasn't like he was a total shitbag like Billy.

He'd probably let Billy down real easy. He probably wanted to be *friends* .

Billy licked his lips. God it was so terrible. "Dunno."

Max's face turned her dangerous red color; she was *really* mad. "You're being a HUGE BABY, YOU SHOULD JUST TALK TO HIM! Don't you want to get back together?"

"Max, are you serious?" She was being too loud like always; Sinclair – Lucas – came to his aid which was a real weird thing.

Max ignored him. "He wants to talk to you!" she told Billy. "He was *worried* about you!"

"Yeah, I don't care."

"Okay, *that's* harsh," Lucas said. "He looked like he was gonna fling himself into the ER last week."

Steve was such a bleeding heart. Billy didn't really have a chance to think about that; there was a big crumpled-up gremlin face glaring at him. "Billy, are you for real? You're being such a – "

"What, he ain't been calling here."

"Yeah, because you said not to!"

"Maybe he's too busy with his girlfriend."

Max turned even redder. She was gettin' all worked up in her hysteria on Steve's behalf; was about a level six. "He didn't even GET BACK with Nancy! He was with me like the whole time! He helped us bring stuff to YOUR PLACE yesterday! He was REALLY WORRIED about you!"

"Okay," Billy said. He didn't want to talk about this. She was still looking at him though. "Look, it's better this way. Eat your fuckin' food that I bought you, okay?"

"How is that better? Why are you – "

"Why you wanna do this with me?" Billy demanded. He grabbed her plate and jabbed his stupid plastic fork into the cake he'd bought her. Shit he didn't even want to eat anymore. "Why you wanna make me do this? I fuckin' saw him, okay? I know what he looks like when he wants somebody."

Max stared at him and didn't say anything; Lucas looked majorly uncomfortable. "Sorry," she said finally. "I ... okay. I'll stop."

"Okay," Billy said too. He ate her cake just out of spite.

That'd been yesterday though; today he was gettin' to go to his new place. Max had gotten his key from the landlady; she'd been moving stuff for two days. Billy still wasn't real excited even though he was more excited than he'd been. He'd do anything to not be in the hospital anymore. Mostly he just wanted to go to sleep. He hoped he had a bed or somethin'.

Billy's car was still all smashed up and Susan was working late and his old man was a piece of shit; Hopper came and picked him up in his truck, not the work one. Elijane was with him and she and Max whispered away in the backseat. She was back to (almost) being a normal kid again; Billy was still dreaming about that little window with the bars on it.

It took a long time to drive back to Hawkins. Hopper had some boxes of Billy's stuff in the back of the truck from Neil's and Susan's place (not his place anymore); real true fear struck into Billy's heart at the thought of Hop bein' around his old man.

Max and Elijane thundered up ahead of them to carry the boxes up to the second floor. Jane floated two boxes with her mind. "KID, ARE YOU SERIOUS?" Hopper said; she carried the last box up like a normal person.

He stood real awkward with Hopper while the girls messed up the place in two seconds. There was a big TV but no cable yet; Max had a bunch of VHS tapes she'd already hawked off of Wheeler and Henderson. She and Jane were supposed to be setting the stuff up but they were already giggling away in Max's little room. She had her ugly beaded curtain up across her opened door.

Hopper was smoking a cigarette in the little kitchen. He hadn't asked Billy if he could smoke in here.

He handed one over. It burned his throat a little; he hadn't smoked a cig in almost two weeks.

Maybe it was laced with poison. There was still a part of him that didn't understand why the chief hadn't killed him.

Hop smoked his cigarette. There was a huge thump from Max's room; they both winced. "You up for having a sleepover?" Hopper asked him.

What, with you? Billy almost said like a moron. He didn't understand for a few seconds. "You want the kid to stay here?"

"Just for like a night or something. She wanted to, just for a while. I said it's okay if it's okay with you." He was flickering his lighter. "Not like she's gotta go to school in the morning."

"Yeah. She can stay here with me."

"Okay." Hopper was staring at him in a weird way; he looked like he wanted to say something. He leaned with his hands on one of the counters in the kitchen. Billy watched him ash his cigarette into the sink. "Listen, I ... you remember that stuff I said to you in the hospital?"

There'd been a lot of stuff. "What part?"

“When I said she showed me what happened. She didn’t really just show me her stuff. I saw ... some stuff with you too.”

Billy stared at him and didn’t say anything. There’d been a lot of stuff that he hadn’t wanted the kid to see; it’d be even worse if Hopper saw it.

“So you know after, after, I ran a file on your dad. You know he has a file? Saw those reports with your mom. Those ones the neighbors called in.”

Billy still didn’t say anything.

“You guys ever wanna say anything about him, he comes here messin’ with you, I can probably put him away. Probably for a while.”

Billy ached into the sink, too. Hopper was just looking at him. “He ain’t gonna come around here.”

“Okay. I’m just saying.”

“He doesn’t hit Max’s mom,” Billy told him.

“I wasn’t – “

“Don’t want you to think I’d just move out and let him beat on some new lady.”

“I didn’t say that. I’m just telling you. If he bothers you here.”

Billy didn’t really know what he was supposed to say to that. He guessed the chief knew he still couldn’t really take care of himself. “Yeah, thanks.”

Hopper left pretty soon after. Billy still had to take about a million pills; he took those and then he helped the girls unpack. Joyce Byers had found him a bed and a little brown couch. He’d have to say thanks. They all walked across the street together to the good Chinese place to get food; just walking a block wiped Billy out but he didn’t wanna let the girls go alone.

It felt insane to just be walking down the street after everything that had happened. He felt glad when they were back at the apartment with its sparse furniture. Max put on *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* (Billy knew a Henderson motion picture when he saw one, the little nerd) and Billy passed out midway through without eating. When he woke up Jane was standing in the kitchen in Max's pajamas, eating a frozen Eggo like a weird person. Someone had painted his nails in the night.

Billy felt okay even though he felt like a fucking fairy. At least the nails were black. "Did you do this?" he asked Jane. She gave him a look and didn't answer him. "Why'd you let her do this?"

She smiled. She gave him a waffle that was actually cooked.

A couple of days went by. Jane ended up stayin' with him for the whole weekend. Hopper had gotten called up into another police conference; there was a big crackdown on a cocaine rink up in Indianapolis (Billy filed that away for later). Hop hadn't been in to work for practically the whole time that the kid had been gone and he had a lot of shit to make up for. Billy didn't know why he was lettin' Jane stay with him; he even gave him money for groceries and shit.

It was okay with the kid there and with Max there. He'd kinda thought that Max would flip her shit over it, her hangin' around so long. He'd asked her about it Friday morning when Jane'd been in the bathroom taking the longest shower in the world like every frickin' girl did.

"I don't have a problem with El," Max said. "She's my friend too." She gave him this real nasty look as she put her backpack on. "But don't forget *I'm* your sister, dirtbag." She was too fucking sweet.

He didn't do too much with the kid there. He still felt too fucked up and kind of dizzy, not like his real self. He mostly slept on the couch for the whole day. Jane looked through a stack of Max's magazines.

When Max got back from school he took her and Jane to the shop

with him; Hank's brother Miles sat up front with the kids while Hank took Billy into the back and showed him his car and talked his ear off.

"What happened t'ya, Bill?" Hank asked him. "Was real worried about you, thought you'd ran off on me."

"M'real sorry, man. I ain't mean to do that."

"Kid sis told me these boys from South Bend jumped you. What I tell you' bout your nasty rat-mouth?"

Hank had a lot to say about his nasty rat-mouth; Billy had missed him really bad. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Fixed your windshield up, did you see your girl? You can still drive her, looks real ugly."

"Yeah, I don't really ... " He had this weird blank feeling, too, looking at his car. He'd always cared so much about what it looked like before. That didn't really seem to matter now either. "I can't really pay for this shit, man. I can you pay for the glass. I can't really – "

"Eh, we can work something out." Hank looked truly evil; Billy didn't know why he hadn't realized before that Hank was truly evil. "Maybe you can work the front for me or somethin'." Hank hated bein' nice to the customers.

Billy stared at him. "You'd really do that shit to me?"

"Look at you, what you gonna do with that arm all damn summer?"

Billy couldn't really say too much to that. He was pretty sure anyone else would have let him go.

Stuff was going too good for him so it made sense that Steve wouldn't leave him alone. Max had said that he'd been over on Thursday night when Billy'd been asleep. He came over knockin' on Friday night when Susan and the girls and Wheeler Jr were there; Susan had brought him a bunch of dishes and towels and house stuff that he hadn't even thought about buying. Seemed just about everyone was

bringing him dishes; he had some from Henderson and Mrs. Wheeler now and Mrs. Byers too. Half of them was dirty already because Max and Jane were total cretins.

Max leaned halfway out in the hall to talk to Steve while Susan stood in the kitchen with a confused look on her face. Jane was drinking Nesquik out of a Donald Duck mug with Mike hovering over her like usual.

Earlier he and Billy had had this huge moment together where Wheeler'd told him he was glad he hadn't died and gave him a Mark McGwire rookie card. From Henderson, he'd said. Billy was still trying not to fucking cry about it.

"Billy's asleep right now," Max lied her ass off. She spread herself against the door like Steve was gonna body-slam her out into the hall. "I can't let you in if he says no." She leaned out into the hallway even more; Billy couldn't hear what she was saying. After a long time she closed the door and came back into the kitchen. She was glaring up a big storm at Billy. "You're such a baby," she told him.

Susan still looked confused but that might have been on account of her not knowin' why Billy would be babysitting one of Maxine's friends. "Was that Steve?"

"Steve and Billy are fighting," Max told her.

"No we ain't," Billy said. Jane drank her chocolate milk, looking at him. He felt sick with everyone knowin' about it all; it was this heavy feeling in his throat that he couldn't swallow down. He was probably making Steve feel like a total asshole. He almost went to the door.

There was this part of him that didn't care, though, this part of him that felt like it was good. The part of him that kept on seeing Steve with Nancy. He really wanted it to just be over with. He didn't think he could just be friends with Steve. He didn't know why he was doin' this to him.

Wheeler was lookin' at Billy with the same weird expression he had been for the last hour or so; Billy didn't know what he looked like. "Why don't you want to talk to him?" he asked. "He was -- "

Jane was tugging him by the hand. "Want to watch the movie now," she said so Billy didn't have to answer. The kids sat on the floor and let Billy have the couch all to himself. Susan put some of the dishes away. Billy kept looking at the door.

Saturday he had to go out to Bloomington in his crushed up car; Hank'd reminded him about those welding classes and he had to sign up before the end of the weekend if he wanted to start in July. He left Max and Eliane to trashpick more furniture and wreck the apartment even further.

It felt too weird to be driving his car; the shocks in the back were totally fucked. He got his paperwork for the classes. He had to go back home to Neil's and Susan's place and get his birth certificate; he was really looking forward to that. He had to pull over on the way back, got too dizzy. He wasn't supposed to be doing too much stuff. Probably should have asked Sue to take him; she'd have done it even if she was still pissed off at him. Maybe not too pissed at him because the dishes she'd brought over were new and shit; she didn't have to do that.

When he got home – he guessed it was really home even though all he had was a cruddy couch and two little brats – there was even more stupid shit around. There were like four potted plants and Henderson had brought a huge box of crap over. Billy could tell by Max's glare that Steve had been here. Jane was looking at him too.

Billy squished himself on the couch with the girls. "Gotta get more furniture, dunno how I'm gonna get it up here like this."

Max looked really shifty in about two seconds. "Too bad we don't know someone who could help."

Billy didn't want her to start up with her *talk-to-Steve!* shit. "What you wanna watch?"

Max picked *Alice in Wonderland* because she was a little horror. Jane hadn't seen it. Billy smoked a lot of cigarettes.

Sunday morning Max woke him up poking away at him. She was headed off to the arcade to meet Sinclair. “You need to start sleeping in your *actual bed*, ” she said like a damn mom; Billy was crashed out on the little couch again. “Are you guys gonna be okay without me here?”

Billy thought about it; he still felt kinda fucked up. He didn’t remember what he’d been dreaming about but it hadn’t been too great. “I think so.”

“Okay. I won’t be gone for that long.” Max gave him a hug and kissed the side of his face which was terrible; she’d done that shit Friday too, in the morning when she’d gone off for school and yesterday before he’d gone off to Bloomington.

“Just made me like even gayer,” Billy said; Max fixed him with a weird look.

“Um ... Steve has to work today, so ... if anyone comes over while I’m gone, don’t worry, it’s not him.”

“Who’s coming here?” Billy asked her.

“What? No one!” She was putting her Keds on. “See you later! You should try to eat something!” she said still like a mom or a girlfriend. She slipped out the door before Billy could start grilling her.

Jane was crashed out in Max’s little room talkin’ to Hop on the phone; Max’d got Billy’s old bed from the house. She was okay so he let her be. He went into the bathroom and changed his bandage since it was pretty gross again. He really needed to shave.

He didn’t really have anything to do and it made him feel kind of restless. He knew what he wanted to do but he couldn’t do that. He unpacked the box of weird stuff from Henderson. He moved Max’s stupid plants around for a while; they looked good on the window by the fire escape. Brought some more stuff into his bedroom – practically empty and he hadn’t even slept in his bed yet – and hung up his posters from his old room around the place. Max had brought a lot of his shit even though he’d said he hadn’t wanted the stuff.

He put the stereo on and started washing all of Max and Jane's dishes. It took him a while because they never stopped fucking eating. At around eleven the doorbell sounded; Billy almost cracked the Donald Duck mug in half.

He ignored the bell and it rang again. Billy leaned over the kitchen counter and stared at the door, probably looked like a total freak-show. Okay. He could be a normal person and answer the door. He didn't need to be fuckin' scared of it.

He crossed the room and opened the door up, then he almost swung it shut right away.

Jonathan Byers was standing there and he had a huge red leather couch behind him in the hallway.

He stared at Billy like a serial killer. His creepy, watery eyes blinked. "Hey," he said.

Suddenly everything made sense: Billy figured he must have actually died before and now he was in hell. He guessed the last couple of days he'd been in purgatory or something but now it was actual real hell. Somehow he managed to speak instead of screaming. "Hey," he said too. "What you doing here?"

Byers looked around; he seriously looked like a forty year-old pedophile. "I, uh. Max told my mom you guys needed some help getting stuff in here the other day. I borrowed my neighbor's truck."

Max was going to make *Billy* turn into a serial killer. He just stood there lookin'. "Your brother here with you?" he asked finally.

Byers got a weird look on his face. Well, he always looked weird. "He's at work," he said slowly. "Um. He wanted to come by with Mike before. I know he wanted to see you. Sorry, you got me instead."

"Uh, that's okay." Not really but whatever.

"So, where do you want this?" He looked over his shoulder; it was that fucking red leather Freddie Mercury couch from the thrift store. Billy thought up about eighty ways to kill Max before she even got

back through the doorway.

“Doesn’t matter.” Billy stepped out into the hall; he and Byers did a kind of awkward shuffle around each other. “How’d you get this up here?”

“Oh, one of your neighbors was coming down, he helped me bring it up. Um.” He stared at Billy some more with his creepy eyes. “Should you be moving stuff right now?”

“I’m fine,” Billy said.

“Okay.”

It took them forever trying to get the couch to fit through the door. After a while Elijane came out into the living room and stared at them. She’d gotten changed out of Max’s pajamas and had on a big shapeless t-shirt under a big shapeless pair of overalls. Hop dressed her like such a princess.

“Hey, El,” Jonathan said from where he was crushed between the arm of the couch and the doorframe.

Jane ignored him. “Move,” she said, so the boys moved. The couch slid through the doorway real easy.

“Oh. That works,” Byers said. He looked around. The corners of his lips twitched in a disturbing manner; Billy realized in horror that he was trying to smile. “Nice place,” he said.

“Thanks,” Billy managed.

“Nice poster.” He nodded to a Bauhaus poster that Billy had just put up on the wall; he couldn’t believe he was gonna have to take it down now.

Jane swept past them and picked up the Donald Duck mug again; she ignored Billy glaring at her. She mixed herself up some more chocolate milk while Billy and Jonathan stared at her and then came back into the living room. She looked at the two couches and moved them around with her mind until Billy guessed she was satisfied. She glanced back up at him. “Good?”

“Sure.”

She considered the Freddie Mercury couch. “Bitchin’.” She sat down with her chocolate milk.

Byers looked around; he was just standing by the TV with his hands in his pockets. He didn’t look like he was leaving any time soon. Billy had to remind himself that he liked Wills a whole lot and this was the kid’s brother so he managed not to say anything super shitty like, *door’s right there*. He said instead, “You want something to drink?” That was what you asked when you had people over even if they were fucking weirdos. Billy could be a normal person who had people over even if they was serial killers.

“I’ll take a chocolate milk,” Byers said.

Jesus God. Billy got him the chocolate milk.

“Thanks for bringin’ the couch.” He was so polite; he was gonna need so much candy later.

“Sure. No problem.”

Byers stood there in the kitchen and talked to Billy for a while. It was like torture. He didn’t ask Billy about where he and Jane had been or anything. He asked him about his job and what he was going to do about finals. Billy said he guessed he was going to school tomorrow.

“Really? Should you do that?”

“Can’t really do summer school.”

“Oh. Right. I guess not.”

Byers left right as Max came in; it was like the crossing of the guards or some shit. It was almost two PM. Her eyes got real big when she saw Jonathan; they’d nearly bumped into each other as she’d opened the door. She ignored Billy giving her a huge look. “Hey Jonathan!”

“Hey.” Now he was standin’ there looking at Max instead of leaving; Billy lamented his life. “I brought the couch,” he said.

"I ... see that." Max also looked like she was lamenting her life. "Thanks a lot. From both of us!"

"I fucking said thanks," Billy told her. Max looked skeptical.

"He said thanks," Jonathan told her. "Okay. See you guys."

"Later," Billy said in great relief.

Max flounced into the living room to go see Jane. "Did you guys clean the couch off?" They both looked blank. "Oh, my GOSH." She started bitchin' her head off screaming about germs; her moms had loaded them up with cleaning supplies too so they wiped the couch down.

Max sat down happily and Jane reclaimed her spot on the end. Billy sat between them. "You're a bitch, Max," he told her.

"Whatever. You know it looks good!" It was pretty comfortable.

He felt really tired and fucked out again; it was from the pain of being nice to Jonathan Byers. His arm hurt and his head hurt. It hurt in the backs of his eyes too. Even so the room was dim and he felt okay. He didn't feel all freaky fucked up like he had been in the hospital or nothing. He felt okay on the stupid couch with Max and with Jane. Been here about four days and it already felt more like a home than his fuckin' house ever had. Maybe even back in California too.

Max was already taking over his whole fucking life again like usual; she had a buncha tapes she'd brought over from the house. They watched four episodes of *General Hospital* and Max talked her head off the whole time explainin' the whole series to Elijane. Elijane nodded all serious.

Billy thought it was real great that he'd been missing for a week and she and her moms had kept up with their soaps; he said this to her.

Max gave him one of her poison looks. "These aren't Mom's, Hank taped these!"

Jesus Christ. Billy filed that away to make fun of Hank for later.

The last episode ended and Billy got up to go to his room; he had to sleep in there sometimes. Someone had even found him a dresser, maybe Hopper. He took his fifty million pills and laid in his new fancy bed for a few minutes. He thought it would take him a real long time to fall asleep but he conked out in a couple minutes.

Woke up from a weird dream to someone knocking on his door; it was Max peering in at him. “Hey – sorry. It’s just me. Were you asleep?”

“What time’s it?”

“Past six. Um ... are you getting up?”

“Why?”

“I ... Steve’s here again.” She had a weird look on her face. “He ... has something for you.”

Fuck. Billy didn’t answer her for a couple seconds. “You let him in here?”

“No, I didn’t *let him in*, ” Max huffed. “How long are you going to do this? You need to just talk to him!”

“I don’t wanna talk to him,” Billy said like a huge baby. It was totally dumb but he didn’t want to have the breakup talk. They could just keep on not talking. Just for a while.

Maxine actually stamped her foot; if he didn’t feel so horrible he’d be getting a big kick out of her. “Why are you acting like this? He came here four nights in a row! He came to the *hospital*! Do you think he’s going to yell at you or something?”

Billy didn’t know. Okay, he knew. “No.”

“So just – why are you being like this? I need you to make up with Steve, I MISS HIM! HE SAID HE’D TAKE US TO DENNY’S!”

“I don’t give a fuck if you talk to Steve.”

Was dark in the room but he could tell her face was red. “Okay, well,

he doesn't want me to talk to him, he wants *you* to talk to him!"

Billy didn't answer her.

"Are you mad about Nancy or something?"

"No," Billy lied.

"Okay, so I don't get it." Billy didn't answer her and she looked even more annoyed. She actually looked weirdly hurt, too. It took him a minute to understand it. She'd liked Steve way before Billy'd even let himself think about not punching his face in. "What, is it ... you don't like him anymore?"

"Sure I like him."

"So why are you being an idiot? Just go talk to him, make up with him like you were going to! That's what people do, Billy!"

He didn't answer her again. He guessed he'd been thinking about it for a while. It wasn't like he didn't want to make up with Steve. It wasn't like he didn't want to say sorry. He could still say it, just didn't know why everyone wouldn't leave him alone for one fucking day. He just needed one fucking day with no one bugging him to calm down.

He'd just had a real long time to think about everything. Think about what a piece of shit he was and to think about Steve and to think about him and Steve. He'd never really treated Steve right; that wasn't fair. He thought maybe if all the shit hadn't happened last week he'd still have gone back over to Steve's place, tried to win him over again. Fight for him or maybe just fight him like they used to. He didn't care about Nancy. He'd still hook up with Steve even if he wanted her.

That just seemed real shitty now. He should just let him be, let him go. It'd be so much easier for Steve without Billy around fucking everything up. He told Max, "It's easier this way."

She stared at him blankly. "What the hell does that even mean?"

"Just tell him -- "

"I'm not telling him anything!" she snitted at him. " *You* can tell him if you want." Her voice softened a little; he wondered what he looked like for her to do that. "You should just talk to him. He says he's just gonna stay out there."

Jesus God. He didn't understand why Steve was doing this. He was totally fucked in the head with his white-knight complex or something. Billy was obviously fine. He didn't need someone to fucking check up on him.

Billy didn't answer her. After a while she said she had to go to work and went away.

He thought maybe he'd sleep some more but he couldn't even close his eyes; he felt too horrible. The dark of the room was gettin' to be too much so after a couple minutes he wandered back out into the living room and crashed back on the couch with Jane; she put her little head on his shoulder

Max was digging around in the cabinets sorting through what little food they had to try and make herself a sandwich for work. Billy was gonna have to go shopping with her, maybe tomorrow. Hank didn't want him back at work till next week so he had a lot of time. Should probably get more stuff. He was thinking about everything but Steve out in the hall.

Max got her shoes on and got her board; she and Jane whispered at each other for a while and then she did her new usual schtick of givin' him a hug. He was pretty sure she was pissed at him so it was nice or whatever that she did it. "I have to help Joyce close, I'll be back after ten."

"Okay," Billy said. "Be careful."

Max gave him a weird look. Jane said, "It's safe now." Billy didn't say anything.

Max went over to open up the front door, just stared for a couple seconds; she closed it again. She was making a face. "Steve's still there," she told him. Billy didn't say anything. Max rolled her eyes and made another huffing noise. "Okay. See you later."

She left quietly, closing the door behind her. Billy stared at it.

Jane was shifting away next to him; she got up and put another tape on, some old black-and-white film. She was looking at him when she sat down again. She looked at him all through the starting credits of the movie. Finally about ten minutes in Billy looked over at her; she was gonna bore a fuckin' hole in his head. "You don't want to see Steve?" she asked him.

He hadn't wanted to talk about it with Max and he didn't want to talk about it with the kid. "I just, uh. Don't think it's a good idea."

Her eyes were so big, looking at him. They were brown too like Steve's and like Tracey's. "But you thought about him so much," she said.

"Yeah, well, I just." He didn't know what to say to her; he'd thought she knew it all already.

"Just hurts."

"I guess."

Someone started banging away on the door; they both looked over. Of course it was Steve. He sounded pretty annoyed. "Bill, are you serious?" he said through the door; Billy hadn't heard his voice in almost three weeks. "I'm not going anywhere, just fucking let me in so I can talk to you."

Billy stared at the door and then he stared at the TV. He'd seen this movie before, had to watch it in school. His arm was throbbing along with his heart. He felt real sick inside.

He was such an asshole and he couldn't even go to the door. He didn't know why Steve wouldn't just let it go. Be so easy for him. He didn't know why he was doing this. He never let anything go.

He was still knocking. "Come on, you can't ignore me forever, I kinda know where you live. You're making me feel like shit, man."

Billy knew it. He was real good at it. He was such a piece of shit.

Jane was looking at him and then she was looking the door, she had a weird expression on her face. She tilted her head to the side.

The doorknob actually rattled; Billy wondered what Steve'd do if it'd actually been unlocked. Billy would be okay if he didn't come in here. He hadn't hooked up with Steve anywhere in here so he could be okay in here. He wouldn't have to look at random shit and think about him. He wasn't --

The doorknob rattled some more. "Look, I've been here for four days in a row, you can't keep doing this to m -- "

Jane tilted her head again. Billy felt the surge of energy go across the room, through the TV and right through the door. Steve stopped talkin'. There was this muted thud like something being thrown, then Steve said, "OW! WHAT THE *FUCK!* "

"SHIT, MAN, ARE YOU SERIOUS?" Billy exploded at her and got up off the couch; the kid just looked up at him. It was totally stupid but he thought *If she fucking hurt him.*

"I didn't hurt him," Jane said.

Billy ignored her. Now he felt less sick and more pissed off; the both of them were pieces of work. If she hurt him.

"I didn't hurt him!"

"Whatever," Billy told her. "You can't just be doing that shit whenever you fuckin' feel like it." Jane just looked at him, then she turned back to the TV.

"Maybe you should ... check on him," she said lightly. "He might not be okay."

He stared at her. She thought she was real slick just like Maxine did; she looked real fucking pleased with herself. She wasn't his sister like Max was but he guessed she'd got him to do the one thing that Max hadn't been able to do.

"You're such a fuckin' brat," Billy told her. Jane ignored him.

Billy took a couple breaths. He stalked across the room to the front door and threw it open.

5. Chapter Five

Summary for the Chapter:

“Look, I care about him, I bought him flowers!” Steve told El. “That shit cost me like thirty bucks, I go all out.”

“I know!” The kid’s eyes were all wide like it was important to her that Steve knew she cared that he went all out. “They were – really pretty. Before I crushed them in the door. I’m sorry.”

Chapter Five

Everything sucked. It was totally dumb.

Steve got ready for work on Tuesday and thought about how totally stupid everything was.

It’d been a couple of days since Hopper had called him up to say that he’d found El and Billy. Four long days if you wanted to get technical about it. Steve still hadn’t gotten to see either of them. Well – El was El, so Steve wasn’t sure when he’d get to see her. They were both okay though which was the important thing.

The other important thing was that Bill didn’t want to see him. It was totally, massively stupid.

Steve was trying not to think about it too much but he kept thinking about it. How was he supposed to not think about it. Billy could have died. They both could have died; Bill could have *died* . It was too fucked up.

After Hop called him on Friday night Steve’d basically freaked out – he was pretty good at that, he guessed. He’d practically ripped the phone off the wall somehow trying to hang it back up.

Two of the messages blinking on the answering machine had been

from Max and her mom. Susan must have been waiting for Max to get home so that they could go see Billy. On the machine, Max had said Bill was in the hospital in Hamilton and that if Steve had waited another minute before he left that he could have gone with them; she called again and said *How the HELL are you not home yet? You drive so slow!* The other messages from Dustin, Nancy, and Will were about the same – well, not the part complaining about his driving skills.

He didn't drive slow anyway – he drove like a completely normal person and followed the flow of traffic which was what you were *supposed* to do. Sometimes he didn't even use his turn-signals. Max was just used to driving with her crazy brother; he'd ruined her for life.

Anyway. God. That wasn't important. Nancy had always said that he could never be serious which wasn't true. His mom said that too. They had a lot of similar thoughts about him for two women who didn't really like each other.

Anyway again. Billy and El were in a hospital up in Hamilton which was out past Indianapolis. It was almost two hours away. By the time Steve had got there all the kids were there and Hop was there and Mrs. Byers was there; Mrs. Wheeler was there yelling her head off at Mike for some reason. Well, she was usually yelling her head off at Mike.

Hopper had taken him aside and explained all the shit to him; it'd been those guys like he'd thought. They'd had some crazy plan for Eleven and had basically held them hostage. Maybe in the hopes of getting their old jobs back or opening a new branch of the lab, Hop thought. Bill had just gotten taken along for the ride.

“What, did they, like, *torture* him?” Steve had asked, probably too loud – Hop gave him a big look since they were in a very public place and all.

He didn't answer Steve for a moment. “Looks pretty bad,” he'd said finally. “Sorry I called you out here. He was in surgery all day, don't even think his parents'll get to see him tonight.”

Bill's parents. Everything was kind of rushed together. Steve

remembered Neil and Susan there; Max a sullen presence between them, listenin' to them arguing. They'd argued for a long time and Susan had stormed off twice, leaving Max stuck by the nurses' desk.

Steve had watched them for a while. Bill's dad had left around ten PM, then Max and Susan went on back into the ICU to try and see Bill. Then all the remaining brats had crowded around Steve for like an hour telling him more crap that he already knew and didn't want to know about. Apparently El had killed like eight more people and no one was really freaking out about that which was great. Somehow Mike'd been there when they'd found all the bodies and Steve still had no clue how Hopper had let that happen.

Dustin and Will and Lucas had wandered off to go get food or maybe to go home; Steve couldn't exactly remember. Mike had stayed and Steve remembered that he'd sat down next to him. The hospital in Hamilton was way nicer than the one in Hawkins; the chairs in the waiting room were blue and had cushions.

Mike had been making a weird face; in his head Steve labeled it Stress-Face #4. "So are you gonna ... like, stay here all night?" he'd asked Steve.

"I guess. What about you?"

"I guess," Mike had echoed. "My mom thinks I'm here for Billy too, so..."

"Yeah, that's great."

Stress-Face #5 -- that one was like a grimace. "Uh, I just wanted to say ... you know, sorry again," he'd said. Steve hadn't known what to say. Really, Mike never talked to him too much. "I mean ... about how I told everyone about you guys before. Sorry."

"That's okay, man." It didn't really matter anymore.

"I wasn't ... really thinking. I, I thought it was, like, something we all knew about and just didn't talk about, like how everyone knows Mrs. Byers and Hopper totally banged on New Years, you know?" Mike had said.

Steve stared. “Uh. What?”

Mike had made Stress-Face #6. “UH, WHAT?” he’d said all overwhelmed. “Come on, you have to know about that – “

Steve had stared some more.

“Okay, NEVERMIND, uh – Will gets like really weird when we mention it, so don’t say anything – “

“Gotcha.” They’d resumed sitting in awkward silence.

Mrs. Wheeler had collected Mike around midnight; Steve waited a little longer for Max and her mom to come back out. Finally they had at past one. Susan had looked okay but Max’s face had been all splotchy like she’d been crying.

“Oh, Steve, you didn’t have to wait here all night,” Susan told him. She had had this really concerned look on her face for him and it’d made Steve want to scream, even though he usually liked Susan a whole bunch. She was a nice enough lady despite the fact that she’d married Bill’s asshole dad. She always looked the same to Steve, kinda like a cartoon character or something. She was always wearing one of four patterned blouses with her hair pulled halfway back. Right then her hair had been all crazy though.

Steve had ignored the concerned look and he hadn’t screamed or anything (he barely ever screamed, really). “Is he okay? Did he wake up?” *When can I see him?*

“Yeah, he was awake,” Max said in this subdued voice.

“Okay, did he – say anything? Is he okay? Did he – say anything about me?”

Max’s face had turned this dull red color, like an old brick. Steve’d been real scared that she’d start crying again. Definitely the wrong thing to say. “No, he didn’t ask for you, just his DEAD MOTHER,” she’d snapped out; Steve had stared at her.

Susan had put her hand on Max’s little shoulder. “Okay, Max.”

So that'd been real fun, thinking about that all night. The next day Steve had called the hospital and Max hadn't let him talk to Bill. Well she'd said he didn't want to. *Why, is he okay?* I guess. *Why doesn't he, he wanna talk to me?* Because he doesn't want to! *Yeah, okay, why not?* He doesn't feel good, Steve! He almost died like three times today!

Jesus H. He'd said, *Max, you don't have to be a dick to me; I'M NOT!* she'd said. He'd asked her if Bill had really seen him and Nancy together and Max said that she guessed he had. Steve said, *I didn't even fucking do anything with her* and Max had said, *Yeah, well, I'm sure that's what you think but that's not what he SAW* – and Steve had said okay, okay, okay.

He'd gave Max a message for Bill – he felt like a goddamn little kid, playing telephone or something: *Tell him I'm glad he's okay, I was really worried about him, I want to see him. Tell him I'm sorry for – that I'm sorry. You know I didn't do anything with Nancy, tell him I didn't do anything with her. This is so fucked up, I wanna talk to him. Okay?*

Max said okay, then she'd hung up on him in the middle of a sentence.

Steve had kind of figured that she would screw off on him now that she had her brother back but she hadn't. Max'd called him about every day which was nice of her; she didn't really have to do that.

She called him back on Saturday night after she'd gone on home with her mom and said sorry for snapping at him. Billy just looked so bad, she'd said. She called him on Sunday all upset because Bill'd got a fever again and wasn't doing too great; she'd called on Monday night from the hospital and said he was doing better. He was in a normal room finally.

Steve had asked her if maybe he should come out there again – you know, since Bill wasn't in the ICU anymore. He could ... bring him stuff, whatever he needed. Max had got real weird about it.

"I got him stuff already."

"Oh. Okay. Well, did you – tell him what I said? He still doesn't

wanna to talk to me?”

“No, it’s ... not that.” The phone line had crackled away – she must’ve been using that one out in the hallway. Steve had just been standing in his kitchen eating peanut butter out of the jar (he was meant to be making a sandwich, but kept feeding Luke crusts from the bread. It was mostly stale anyway. His mom was gonna teleport in from Logansport to scream her permed head off at him in about ten seconds). “He just ... he looks really bad, I dunno. He probably doesn’t want you to see him all messed up.”

“Yeah, I already know his arm got screwed up.”

“No, not his arm,” Max said. “He ... I mean, he got beat up and stuff, his face was totally fu – messed up. You know how he acts all tough and shit – stuff. I’M NOT, MOM!” she’d yelled. “I don’t think he’d want you to come in when he’s all beat up.”

“I don’t care about that,” Steve had told her. “Uh, not that I don’t – I, I wanna see him, I don’t care what he looks like.” Bill always looked good to him anyway. Billy knew that, had to know it.

“Yeah, but *he* would.” She’d been hesitating some more and Steve had known that Bill had told her he didn’t wanna see him. It was so frickin’ stupid. “Just ... just wait til he comes home, okay? I’ll let you know what’s going on. Don’t come all the way out here!”

Steve felt like a big sulky baby. “Okay, yeah, fine, whatever.”

He wasn’t going to bust through the goddamn hospital doors if Bill didn’t wanna see him. He kinda wanted to but he wasn’t going to do that. That was, like, Lifetime movie shit: half the time it did not end well.

He could see Billy not wantin’ him to see him all beat up. It was stupid but he guessed he could see it. He kinda felt hurt that Billy didn’t want to see *him* – it’d been two weeks. If *Steve* had woken up in the hospital, he’d want Billy there with his stupid shirt half-unbuttoned; it would be like a ... well, like a Lifetime movie.

He guessed that maybe he’d thought that they *were* gonna have some

big movie-moment together on Friday or something, even though that was dumb too. Even if Bill was mad about Nancy or whatever, Steve'd still thought that he'd wanna talk.

Anyway he'd only gotten to sulk to himself for about five minutes before Dustin had called him up too; he hadn't even decided which big movie they'd have gotten their moment from. He'd gone over to Dustin's so that he didn't have to think about that shit. He had kind of wanted to think about it but he'd known he shouldn't.

It had been kind of awkward over at the Hendersons' house or maybe Steve just felt awkward. Dustin knew this huge thing about him now and he'd been kind of an asshole about it before. Steve had been in a bad mood and Dustin was just happy as a little clam again because their friends were safe and the bad guys were literally exploded. It made Steve feel like crap. Maybe he should just be happy too.

Dust had been packing up a box of stuff for Max and Billy to take to Bill's apartment; his mom had said they could take practically anything in the basement. Whenever Dustin felt bad about anything or the way he'd acted about something, he always tried to give you about twelve pounds of random junk. Steve wasn't sure why he thought Bill would want a dozen scented candles or the encyclopedias J through M or a little (terrifying) porcelain clown statue but he guessed that was what Bill was going to get for his place. He told Dust he'd take the junk over.

Dustin had asked Steve about a million horrible questions, like when he and Bill had started going out; who was the girl in Steve's opinion if there was a girl; did Steve think they would get back together because they had to get back together because how else could Dustin hang at the new apartment; also did Billy seduce Steve?

Steve had said *I don't know, a couple months ago, no one's the girl, shithead, I don't know, sorry, and no way*, but he privately thought *maybe* about the seducing-thing. Dust didn't need to know about that. He also hadn't really known why Steve and Bill weren't talking so Steve'd had to go into the whole thing with him. He was so fucking tired of telling it.

Dustin didn't tell him that he was a huge cheater for hooking up with

Nancy which Steve felt grateful for. Things like that usually seemed so black-and-white to Dust. He did stare with wide eyes and tell Steve he was insane, though.

“So ... first you decided to hook up with Billy Hargrove, the CRAZIEST guy in school.” Personally Steve thought that was an exaggeration. “And then you got with Nancy AGAIN? DO YOU HAVE A DEATH WISH? BILLY IS A PSYCHO!” Dustin yelled. Then: “Sorry, a psycho that loves you,” he said rapidly. “Like in *Taxi Driver*.”

“*What?* When did you even see that?”

“Hahahaha,” Dust had said like a little weirdo.

Steve wondered if he was supposed to be Jodi Foster. That made no sense because Jodi Foster had been like twelve in that movie and she was a prostitute. But he was pretty sure Dust was implying he was Jodi Foster. He guessed Bill would totally be Robert De Niro – what an annoying bad-ass. “Listen, I don’t feel like – ”

“So do you think he knows that you and Nancy – ”

“Dustin, I’m not talking about this with you.”

Dustin had looked disappointed; like everyone else he wanted the gay details. Steve guessed that he should be glad that things weren’t weird between them anymore even though he still felt weird. “Okay, but ... so is Billy going to get cable at his place?”

“Man, I don’t... know. I guess? He hasn’t even moved in yet, he doesn’t have anything.”

“Oh. Okay.” Dust had started going through his VHS tapes and then Steve’d had to suffer listenin’ to him talk about Star Trek for eighty minutes.

Anyway now it was Tuesday and he was getting ready for work and sulking. He put on one of his Tuesday ties – they had stripes – and let the dogs out for the day. He got the coffee for the office in a big sulk and spent most the day in a big sulk. Linda said he was looking too thin and gave him a sandwich. Joanna cried twice because it was Tuesday which was worse than Monday. The guys were placing their

bets on the Stanley Cup game over the weekend; Steve picked the Flyers since that was one of Billy's teams.

Afterwards he got to go and pick Max and Lucas up from school. Max had said she wanted to start bringin' stuff over to Bill's place so Steve said he'd help her.

A weird sort of awkwardness settled over them as the kids got into Steve's car. It felt totally strange to be goin' to Billy's new place and to his house when Bill wasn't even talking to him. Totally strange and also stupid.

They didn't really talk the whole time that they were loading Bill's stuff up. Max said that her stepdad was due back tonight so they wanted to hurry. They got the few boxes situated into Steve's car – Dustin's box of random crap from his basement was the biggest one – and headed back to the center of town.

Bill's apartment was only about six blocks from his dad's place. It was off of Broad Street which was off of Main Street. That meant that pretty soon he was gonna have a real hard time avoiding Steve.

Steve and Lucas sat in uncomfortable silence while Max went through her backpack to find the keys she'd gotten to her brother's place; Steve knew why Lucas was being weird with him. It sucked. Finally Max got her keys situated and they started off into the apartment.

In the front of the building there was a little room with a bunch of plants and ten mailboxes built into the wall. The carpet was this blue-and-gold pattern. There was a hallway that led to the first floor apartments and there were two staircases, one going up and one leading down into the basement.

It was kind of a nice place – newer, too – even though Max kept joking that it was on the 'wrong side of the tracks.' The kids all thought it was too funny because it really was on the other side of the train tracks. You could see them from the park across the street from the apartment complex.

They went on up the stairs. It was hot in the hallway even though the apartments had air-conditioning in them. Steve shifted a box against

his shoulder and finally spoke. “So, what, is this like all you guys have? What’re you gonna do? Do you need stuff?”

Max was unlocking the apartment. “Um, Joyce got Billy a bed and this old couch, Hop gave us his old kitchen table. I guess it doesn’t really matter. I’ll probably get Billy’s old bed, he said I could take it last night.”

Somehow Steve managed not to ask her if Bill had said anything about him last night; he tried really hard. He figured if Bill had said something Max would tell him. “I mean, is he, like, okay now?”

“Yeah, he’s still good!” She sounded so bright, like Bill hadn’t almost fucking died four days ago. “He probably gets to come home soon. Well – here. I mean, it’ll ... be home soon.”

“Right, but – who’s with him now?”

Max gave him a weird look. She was wearing another one of Bill’s Led Zeppelin t-shirts so Steve didn’t know how good Bill was doing to be lettin’ her hawk all his clothes. “No one? I mean – he’s fine. They’d call my mom if he got bad again.”

She tossed the box she was carrying onto the kitchen counter and looked at Steve’s face; she got a little frown on her own. “He’s okay! I mean, he’s got a TV there and everything!”

YEAH, BUT HE HATES BEING IN THE HOSPITAL! Steve just barely managed to stop himself from yelling in her face.

He was being totally stupid but he couldn’t help it. Bill had said before that his mom had been in hospice and he’d hated it; Steve knew he probably couldn’t stand to be there.

“Okay, so, I mean, like what, he’s all alone?” God he hated it. Bill’d had that fever before and Max had said he’d been all fucked up when she’d seen him over the weekend.

What if he woke up and he was alone. He’d hate it. What if he ... got too scared or something. Okay, not scared – it was stupid to think about someone like Bill ever getting scared, but he had these ... Steve didn’t know what they were. Like panic attacks or stress attacks or

something. He'd had one once when he'd been in Steve's car after his dad had hit him; he'd had one when he'd come over to Steve's house after his dad had hit him again. Steve was pretty dumb but he sensed a pattern. Bill had looked so overwhelmed both times; he couldn't breathe right.

What if he woke up and he was alone in the hospital and he couldn't breathe. Steve should be there with him. Shit he should be there. It didn't matter if they were mad at each other or whatever. It was totally stupid.

Max was looking at him in an even weirder way – he was probably making a face or something. “Steve, he's ... fine,” she said again. “I mean, I saw him last night, he was just complaining about everything.”

“Okay, no, I just, I mean, I don't know.”

“Wow, you're actually really worried about him,” Lucas said; his first commentary since they'd got here. He looked like Steve was being real funny. “Maybe you guys *are* in love, he's like your little princess or something.”

Max's face turned a dangerous red instantly. “You're such a *jerk* – ”

“All right, I'm *jok* – ”

“Look, whatever, I'm just, I'm *concerned* about him,” Steve said. He felt super grumpy in two seconds. He shouldn't have to tell Lucas anything. “It's not because we have a, a *thing*, you know, you can care about someone and have it not – ”

Lucas still looked like something was funny. “Okay, sorry, I guess you're the princess.”

Jesus H he was so annoying; that didn't even make any sense. Steve counted to three in the hopes of feeling less annoyed.

It didn't work. Lucas said, “You know, it's like – ” and Steve grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him against the wall of the kitchen right by the fire escape, *not* gently.

“All right, listen up, you little *shithead* , you know I stopped Bill from kicking your ass two weeks ago, you think I can’t still do the same fucking thing he was gonna do?”

Lucas’s eyes were really wide; his mouth fell open for a second. He tried to straighten up so Steve pushed him back against the wall again. “Oh, my god, I didn’t even say – ”

“I know you and Bill have got shit between you guys, he was a real prick to you. I still don’t think it’s that funny that he almost fucking *died* – “

“I didn’t say it was *funny* – “

“Yeah, whatever,” Steve told him. “I’m really tired of you and your pack of assholes running your mouths off all the time, okay? I guess you little shits think you can just walk all over me because I’m stupid and I just give you rides all the time and buy you fucking food, you know I don’t have to do that.” Lucas didn’t say anything so Steve pushed him against the wall a third time. “Do I have to do that?”

“No. You – don’t ... have to do that.” Lucas was making a face. He didn’t try to twist away or call Steve a *sick freak* again or whatever like he had in the school gym a few weeks ago. He just looked up at him. “I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean anything by it. I don’t know what to ... say about you guys.”

Steve let him go. “Yeah, well, maybe don’t say anything. I’m fucking sick of hearing shit from everybody. So just shut the fuck up. Why’d you even come with us? Everyone knows you fuckin’ hate Billy.”

“I don’t ... *hate* him.” Lucas kept on looking at him. He was still pressed against the wall and he didn’t move to push himself up for a moment. “Sorry, all right?”

Suddenly Steve remembered that Max was there; he turned around and waited for her to end his life for shoving around her boyfriend. Jesus H he was nearly as nuts as Bill.

Max was leaning with her elbows on the little kitchen counter across from them and staring. Instead of enraged she just looked quietly

pleased; Steve'd never understand any girl. "You know, you calling Billy a princess because he likes guys is the same thing as him calling you Midnight because you're black," she informed Lucas.

Lucas made a new face. "No it's not!"

"Yes it is!" Max turned and started tearing open the box she'd tossed beside her on the counter.

"Uh, no. That's, like, a totally different thing – "

"STEVE?" Max asked; they both stared at him.

"I, I, Jesus, I don't know, how about nobody says either of those things – "

"Well, *I* think it's the same thing."

"No, it's not!"

"Mm, yes , it is!"

"Oh, my god, NO, it's not! Okay, you're *white*, and a girl, you don't get to decide – "

"WHAT DOES BEING A GIRL HAVE TO DO WITH IT?" They were really going.

"Jesus Christ," Steve muttered. He opened up a box too.

The week went on and it continued to suck. It was almost as bad as the week before when Billy and El had been missing; Steve was just as confused. Bill came home on Thursday night and he didn't want to see Steve. Max was acting as their referee or somethin' and she wouldn't let him into Bill's apartment. She said he was asleep which

was so convenient.

“So wake him up,” Steve said. It was like a hundred degrees out and he was all sweaty just from standing in the hallway; he’d come here right after work.

“No!” Max looked at him all wide-eyed. She had Eleven hanging over her little shoulder and they were both pressed against the door blocking his way in like they were Billy’s miniature bodyguards.

It was totally weird that El was there; Steve didn’t know what he was supposed to say to her. She and Max both had their hair in braids and they looked all dolled up.

“Why do you guys look all fancy?” Steve asked them. “Are you going out or something?”

“What?” Max looked blank. She touched her braid and tugged it over one shoulder. “Oh, my hair? Billy did it.”

Steve stared back at her. Okay he was definitely in Bizzaro Land again. Maybe El had just ripped them all into a new dimension when she’d been killing everyone or something. Bizarro Land was the dimension where Bill braided up girls’ hair and told his sister that he loved Steve.

“What?” he said. “I – nevermind, just let me come in.”

“No!” Max said again.

“Why not?”

“Um – he’s TIRED!” she yelled like a crazy person. “We just moved everything all day!”

“Well, did you frickin’ tell him that I wanna talk to him?”

“Of course I did! He – said he doesn’t want to!”

Steve didn’t say anything for a few seconds.

It wasn’t like he wasn’t worried about Bill or anything. Obviously he

was. But he was starting to get kind of pissed off too if you wanted the truth. This whole frickin' thing had happened because Billy had been going to come and talk to him. He didn't know how Bill could have gone from that – wanting to come over and apologize – to wanting absolutely nothing to do with Steve, no matter what had happened. He'd gotten *hurt* , and Steve wanted to see him.

Maybe Bill actually was really pissed off about Nancy. Steve could see him being pissed off. Maybe he was pissed and maybe he thought the whole thing was Steve's fault or something. Steve knew it wasn't his fault but it kinda felt like it was his fault. He was trying not to think that way though. Mostly he thought Billy was being a huge baby. He didn't even know why he'd come by.

“Really? That's it? What'd...what'd he say about me?”

Max gazed at him for a couple seconds and didn't answer too; that was bad. “Nuh – nothing! I don't know.”

“Okay, obviously he said something.”

“Yeah, well, he's being an idiot! He's not in his right MIND, Steve!” She looked over her shoulder sharply.

“Jesus, is he right there or something?”

“What? No,” Max lied in a very bad and obvious manner.

“Are you seriously not going to let me in?”

“He *is* sleeping,” Eleven put in.

“He's tired!”

“He didn't eat his General Tso's.”

Max looked weirdly proud of her; Steve remembered when he and Bill had taken the kid to get Chinese food for the first time. She really liked fortune cookies. Okay if Bill couldn't even eat his frickin' Chinese food that probably meant that he was still feeling pretty bad.

“What'd he say?” Steve asked them again.

Max looked annoyed – maybe not at him. “Nothing! He just said that – I don’t know – he said yesterday when we were still up in Hamilton ... that you should just ... forget about him. Um, he said that it’s, like, better this way.”

Steve stared at her too; Eleven stared at both of them. “Uh,” he said. He was so articulate. “How, what, how is that better?”

“I don’t know! He’s all doped up! He’s an idiot!”

“Okay, so let me come in and see him.”

“Uh, NO WAY,” Max said all exaggeratedly like Steve was a total nutjob. “I’m not – sorry, I can’t let you in here if he says no, he’d totally murder me.”

God they could do this all night; Steve already knew that she wasn’t going to let him in. He thought about going around to the back and trying to climb the fire escape but decided that was probably a bad idea; Bill liked to push him out of windows.

He went home in a big sulk instead. He couldn’t think of what else to do.

Friday was more of the same but even worse. Susan was there too and so was Mike; Steve guessed El still must be hangin’ out or something. He could hear the TV and Susan talking and Mike talking and Max laughing before she’d come to answer the door. Her face had fallen when she’d seen him which had been so great.

It just made him feel all ... lonely or something. Lonely and pissed off, but mostly lonely. Friday night was the hockey game – it was the big championships – and Steve’d thought maybe he could coax Bill out of the apartment or something. Obviously that wasn’t happening if he had frickin’ Mike Wheeler at his place and he still didn’t want to talk to Steve.

He went back home to his empty house and felt like a bummed out loser. His mom had been there earlier in the week but they hadn’t really crossed paths; Steve’d been doing his shit with Dustin and with Max and Lucas and Mom had been doing ... whatever her shit was.

She didn't even know about Billy. Well of course she didn't know about the crazy ABDUCTION THING but she didn't even know that he and Bill had had a fight or whatever.

It wasn't the same as before; Steve didn't really think he could get away with telling her anything or crying to her about Billy again. She might know that there was more now to it than just Bill being a crazy jerk. He didn't think he could play it like they'd just had an argument like before. She'd totally know.

He definitely wasn't ready for her to know about him and Bill. There was something to know even if Billy was acting like there wasn't.

Steve cleaned his house and watched the hockey game all by himself like a bummed out loser. He didn't have to watch it by himself – he could call up Kyle or Alex; they'd told him to call them. They were both home now for the whole summer and they were supposed to all play street hockey tomorrow anyway.

He didn't feel like calling them though. Really he didn't even want to play hockey tomorrow but he figured he should go. He'd already ditched out on them last weekend. He was always so focused on one stupid thing and that was how he'd lost all his friends two years ago.

He was too stupid and he wanted *Billy*; he didn't care if he was being stupid. Having Max tell him that Bill thought it was better this way or something made him feel like total shit – that was totally wrong. That didn't make any sense because he and Bill ... they'd had ... well they'd had *something*. They were supposed to be best friends; Billy had said that before. How could it be better this way.

They were more than best friends and it wasn't fair that Bill was doing this to him. Even if he'd gotten pissed off about Nancy or whatever it wasn't like he hadn't – pissed Steve off too. You were supposed to talk to each other after you had fights. Maybe Steve had messed that up waiting too long or something; he didn't know. He *did* know that you weren't supposed to punch your best friend in the face and he'd done that. So maybe he deserved it or something.

It was just that – something about being at Bill's place and hearing the kids inside with the TV on and all had gotten Steve feeling really

messed up. He still felt annoyed but mostly he felt lonely and really sad. He should be there with Bill; it was totally stupid that he wasn't there with Bill.

After the hockey game ended at eleven he laid around in his bed like a sad sack and missed Billy. He still hadn't really let himself miss Billy or think about him in any certain way – you know, *that way* – while Bill'd been gone. It felt wrong to do that when Billy was missing or mad at him or maybe hurt somewhere. Okay Billy was definitely mad at him but Steve was still going to think about him *that way*. What else did he have right now.

They weren't just friends even if Bill was maybe gonna try to pull some bullshit and spin it that way now. They weren't just, like, friends who got each other off or something. It was more than that.

It was definitely more than that; Steve laid in his bed like a loser and thought about Billy and missed Billy. He'd already known that he was gonna whack off before he'd even went into his room. It just felt like that kinda night. He felt too crazy and like a sad horny jerk; he was just laying in his bed hard as a pole and he hadn't even touched himself yet or anything.

Steve got himself all worked up in two seconds thinking about Billy *like that* even if they were both being stupid jerks right now. He couldn't help it. Billy was ... crap, Billy was *hot* – it wasn't just because he was a guy or whatever. He was hot and Steve wanted him. He wanted him; he missed him. He'd thought Billy wanted him too. He'd *known* that, for a while anyway.

He never really jerked off or anything anymore. It was kinda funny to think about it – he hadn't really needed to for a while. He'd had *Billy* and they hung out about four times a week. They hung out about four times a week and they *hooked up* about six times a week so there wasn't even any time to whack off. It was the best thing ever.

Steve'd never really ... had that before. It wasn't like – okay, he liked girls too; he definitely liked girls. When he'd realized that he had a thing for Bill it wasn't like he'd had some huge crisis over it or something. There were worse things to have a crisis over. He still liked girls but he liked Bill too, a *lot*. He'd had Nancy and before her

he'd gone around with this girl Andrea for a couple of months during sophomore year. He knew he wasn't really hot shit or anything but he'd always had someone to go around with.

No one had ever really been like Billy before though. It had been so different with Nance – he'd always had to go through all these steps first. Like how people always made stupid jokes about how girls really made you work for it. Steve didn't think it always had to be like that.

It had kind of been like that with Nancy, though. It didn't have to be. Everything seemed like it always had to be so difficult but it shouldn't be; it was just sex and they loved each other. Steve had thought maybe they'd get better or maybe he could make her want him more. There had to be something he could do.

They always had to make sure his parents weren't home or that her parents weren't home or that Mike wasn't going to be home. Then sometimes they had to do their homework first or -- no, Steve, they had to go to the Hollands' that night, didn't he remember? Steve always forgot; he was never serious. Then sometimes after all that Nancy wouldn't want to hook up with him anyway — they'd kiss for a while and then she'd push him off of her and he'd end up going home with blue balls.

She seemed so disinterested in him sometimes – Steve guessed he knew *why* now – and he'd always felt like maybe he was doing something wrong. He tried really hard to do what she wanted but then somehow it never seemed like it was what she wanted. It didn't make any sense. When you loved somebody you were supposed to want them and you were supposed to want to have sex with them. Not all the time but maybe more than twice a month. Ideally.

Sex was great and all because it was sex but maybe he'd been...doing something wrong. He'd always tried so hard for her and he'd tried to be careful with her; he'd thought maybe he was doing it wrong. Like it could go on for longer or something or, or – he could get better at it. Half the time she didn't even come while they had sex and he usually tried to get her off after but sometimes she didn't even want him to do that. Once they'd been doing it in his bed and he'd thought it had been really good. Nance had twisted her face to the side and

said *Can you hurry up, it – kind of hurts* and Steve had felt so horrible; he'd almost gone soft inside of her. He was pretty sure that wasn't how it was supposed to go.

It wasn't like that with Billy. Well not that they did *that* stuff – they couldn't do that stuff; there was other stuff they could do but they hadn't done that yet. But it was always good when he was with Billy; Billy made it so fucking good. It wasn't really because he was a guy too or anything but maybe part of it was because he was a guy too. It was easier somehow – they already knew how to touch each other. Even when they got each other off in like thirty seconds Steve didn't feel like it should have gone on longer or something; he just wanted to do it again. Steve had never really thought about being with a guy for real but it wasn't confusing like he'd thought it might be. It was just Billy, who wanted him.

Billy had wanted him so Steve didn't understand why Billy wouldn't want him anymore. He put his hand down his pants and started to touch himself, thinking about Billy. He squeezed too hard and it almost kinda hurt; that made him think about Billy too. He hadn't come in like three weeks and he was too sensitive.

He thought about Billy's stupid smug face after he'd got Steve off, or when he was getting Steve off. Bill was a great kisser, too – he could do great things with his mouth. Billy didn't really kiss like Steve had thought he might, all aggressive. Well sometimes he was aggressive but he usually liked to kiss in this real slow, lazy way. It made Steve totally nuts.

Shit. He jerked himself off and thought about Billy. Bill had said before that he loved Steve's cock; Steve wanted to see him. No girl had ever said that crap to him and Steve wanted to see him. They didn't even have to have sex or whatever but it would be cool if they had sex.

He ran his thumb over the head of his cock. He didn't really care about feeling like a loser right now; he was too hot. He wanted it so bad – Billy. He'd used to frickin' jerk off to Billy before they'd even hooked up; now he had so much more stuff to think about. Billy's hot mouth and Billy's mouth *on* him and once Bill'd been blowing him and jerking him off and Steve had been thrusting his hips and

thrusting his cock into Billy's mouth and Bill had said *Yeah, give it to me* and Steve had come all over his face. They'd laughed about it later; Bill had broken that lamp in Steve's room.

God. Fuck. Billy always said that Steve talked too much when they hooked up but he was the one who always said all this amazing dirty shit. It made Steve totally crazy. He thought about Bill's mouth and Bill's hands – he had these great hands too; they were so rough. Bill's mouth kissing him and Bill's hand touching him. He thought about Billy saying *Gotta tell me what you want and do you want me to suck your cock? Say it* and jerked himself. It only took him about a minute and then he came in a big hot rush; he probably went cross-eyed or something.

Then that was over and he was just back to feeling kinda lonely and sad, except now he'd messed up his sheets too. It wouldn't matter if Bill was here. Steve wiped his hand off and fell asleep; he felt like total crap in the morning.

Saturday he played hockey with the guys and got all bruised up. They said next week he should be goalie and he said okay. Then Kyle and Alex wanted to come over and watch the hockey game but Steve said he had something to do.

The *something to do* was standing around in Billy's hallway again like a total moron. He hadn't even been home. Steve hung out in the hall again and shot the shit with Max and El. He waited for like two hours but Bill hadn't come back.

Sunday he'd promised Linda he'd go into the office with her to put all of the orders into the computer. They'd been down for half the week and she was going nuts about it.

They finished at quarter to three and decided to stay until four for more overtime. Steve was such an idiot; he didn't really like being in the office but he liked working overtime. He was trying not to be stupid with his money and overtime money was Billy and Max money, sometimes Dustin money.

He liked getting them stuff. He got paid way too much at this stupid place and he hated to see Max or Dust countin' out their quarters at the diner or the arcade; he'd rather just pay for them. Bill didn't count out his quarters but Steve liked buying him stuff too. Bill got weird about it sometimes but he'd let Steve buy him food or smokes.

Linda said that the three-to-four traffic out of Columbus was always really bad on the weekends. "Lots of old people getting dinner early," she said, then laughed at Steve's face. "Older than me, you little jerk."

"I wasn't going to say anything," Steve told her.

She turned off her little computer monitor. "And yet you were thinking it."

They ordered takeaway from down the street and sat up together in the little front office, then Linda made him tell her all the shit with Billy. She already knew most of it; apparently he'd been in a big sulk all week. He usually tried not to act a certain way when he was at work but he guessed he was really transparent.

Steve had to rehash most of it anyway – he didn't tell her about how he'd jerked off in his bed like a sad little loser two nights ago. He told her about how Bill hadn't wanted to talk to him when he'd called at the hospital and how he'd helped Max bring some of Bill's stuff to his place, how he'd yelled at Lucas a little ("Good for you, baby," Linda said). How he'd made an idiot out of himself for the last three days goin' over to Billy's apartment; he just wanted to say sorry.

Linda was cutting up her mushroom burger; she was so weird. She was probably one of those ladies that cut up their pizza too. "Okay, but I don't – so what exactly do you have to apologize for, hon? I thought you said he was really terrible to you. And, um. That kid. What was his name? Lincoln."

"Lucas," Steve reminded her.

"Oh, right. Sorry."

He tugged on his tie. He hadn't wanted to say this part to her but he

guessed he should say it. Not having told Linda about everything kinda made it seem like it hadn't happened when he was in the office. It felt like Steve could believe that he hadn't done something fucked up to Bill too. He had done it though, so he should say it. "Look, so – Lucas, Lucas goes out with Bill's kid sister, he's ... uh, he's black, Billy kind of has, like, a problem with him – "

" Oh, " Linda said in understanding. She stopped cutting up her burger. "Oh, so he's like Roger, then."

Jesus H. "He's *not* like Roger," Steve told her; he knew all about Linda's crazy love life. "Look, he just, uh – so he said all this horrible shit to the kid, then he said a bunch of shit to me. And I." God he still didn't want to say it. He didn't want her to think differently of him. She probably already did since she knew he liked a guy or whatever. "I hit him, Lin. Like really hard. It was, it was bad."

Linda didn't scream or jump up and announce that he was an abuser. She just stared at him and looked a little sad. "Well, that's what – boys do, sweetheart. Thought you said he got into fights all the time."

"No, but he's not like – " he didn't know what he wanted to say. "*We're* not like that." *Anymore*. "Bill's... his dad... beats on him all the time, I told him I'd never do that to him. That's why he, you know, he dumped me."

Linda looked at him some more. Billy would totally murder him if he knew Steve was blabbing about his life to some coworker Bill'd never even talked to. He didn't even tell *Steve* everything; Steve knew that. Finally she said, "Okay, that's pretty bad, honey."

"Thank you, I know that."

"Well, you just gotta get him to see you, make him know you're really sorry. Then, you know, he gets to say sorry too. You should get him a present or something."

"Yeah, still can't do that if he won't open his door, I'm not gonna like, bust into his place." She was still missing the point.

Linda ignored him (and continued to miss the point). “I think you should do flowers or something, that’d be a really nice gesture coming from you.”

Steve stared at her. And stared at her. Okay he thought he’d been telling her too much about Billy but obviously he hadn’t told her shit about Billy if she thought that Bill wouldn’t rip a bouquet of flowers apart and then jam the stems down Steve’s throat in two seconds.

Linda looked back at him expectantly; finally Steve realized she was waiting for him to answer her. He managed, “Uh, yeah. I, I don’t think that’s, uh, a good idea.” He reminded her, “We’re *boys*?”

“Are you? I couldn’t tell. Drop your pants.” She adjusted her glasses. Steve rolled his eyes; Linda was the worst.

“Yeah, we’re, we’re boys, we don’t do that shi – that stuff – “

“Baloney,” Lin said decisively. “You never got a girl flowers?”

“I, yeah, well, that’s – “

“What about love and commitment?”

“Oh my god – “

“I’m just saying, Steve.”

“Forget love and commitment, what about the *Stanley Cup*? ” Steve asked her. Lin looked blank so he said, “That’s – hockey – “

“Oh, right, that sport thing. You know the boys have a pool here.”

“I know, I’m going to win it,” Steve told her. “Bill and I always watch that together. If he doesn’t want to frickin’ watch hockey with me then we have a real big pr – look, I mean, I did, I did hook up with my ex-girlfriend. And he – I guess he, he saw it. And he did get ... uh, carjacked.”

If he really told Linda that Billy had been kidnapped by ex-government agents for a week she might decide to call security on his crazy ass after all. They didn’t even have security here right now

because it was a weekend but she'd probably call them in. He finished, "So I can get him not wantin' to see me."

"This is Nancy, right? The ex?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Well, why'd you do that, honey?" Linda demanded. "I thought you knew better than to get back with her."

"Okay, look, I didn't get back with her, I dunno why everyone keeps – "

"We talked about her, baby!"

"Lin, yeah, I know – "

"How many times did we talk about her?"

Steve rubbed his face; he didn't feel like thinking about Nancy when he just wanted *Billy* . "Yeah, I know," he said again through his hands.

"She's not good for you – "

"Oh, my god, Linda, okay, we really don't need to frickin' go through it again – "

"I'm just saying!" She adjusted her big glasses again with an officious air. "I don't want to see you like how you were when you first started here!"

"I'm, I'm not, we're just friends. She just – it was like a thing, she just wanted to hook up – "

Linda huffed. She even crossed her arms like a little girl or a nun. "Oh, well! That's lovely! You know, Steven, that's really typical!"

"I didn't do anything with her," Steve told her; he had no clue why he was telling her. Maybe she was kind of like a mom after all. She had him wanting to explain himself to her. She'd even pulled out his whole name too, jeez. "I wouldn't – we just kissed a couple times. I

didn't know how to tell her I had – “ What did he have. *Had* . Someone. “But he, you know. I guess he thinks we slept together.”

“Oh. Okay.” She frowned again. “That's not – hm. That's not really good either, Steve.” She made one of her sad tea kettles noises.

“Yeah, I know. I just – want to see if he's okay – “

“Is that all?”

Steve frowned at the tabletop. His fries were getting cold; he didn't want them anymore.

“I don't ... know,” he said slowly. It was true – he *didn't* know anymore. He'd been freaking out all week and all he'd thought about had been Billy, Billy, Billy; now apparently Bill didn't even want to see him. It made him feel like total shit and he didn't know what he wanted anymore. Like maybe ... everything he'd thought before really had been wrong. Had to be totally wrong if Bill didn't want to see him or even frickin' watch hockey with him. “I don't really know what he thinks, I never know what the hell he thinks. He really said some – really shitty stuff to me before, Lin.” God, maybe he'd really meant it. “He broke up with me.”

She looked so sweet and sympathetic. “I'm sorry, honey.”

“Yeah, it – it really sucked. He's not – like anyone I've ever – I dunno. It's like, with him, it's like one step forward, one step back.” He scratched his eyebrow. “It's like we never get anywhere.”

“Sounds like Richard.”

Steve sighed. “Look, that guy was a total dick to you, it's not like – “ Linda laughed loudly – “okay, I didn't mean to make a pun – “

“You sound so sad, Steve.”

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged like a little kid. “I, I miss him. I was worried about him. And he's – being a total dick to me too, I shouldn't even have to – ” he stopped talking. He did have to apologize to Bill; Linda didn't know all about it. Even if she knew that Steve'd hit him now she didn't know about all of it. Billy had

trusted him. He did have to apologize. “You know what, it doesn’t matter.”

Linda didn’t say anything. She was just looking at him again and he wondered if she thought he was totally stupid. He knew she cared about him or whatever – he felt like total crap for ignorin’ her all last week – and he knew she liked her office gossip, but she was like thirty years older than him. She’d been married and divorced and had had a kid somewhere in there too. She probably thought he was totally stupid, crying over some guy he’d barely been with for three months. He was lucky she was even processing the ‘some guy’ part.

“You know what I think?” Linda asked him.

“What? That I’m, uh, just a stupid kid, and I don’t need to, like, be worrying about relationships and shit?” Everyone loved to tell you you were a stupid kid until you were about thirty he guessed.

“No, I’m thinkin’ you look even sadder now than when you started here.”

Oh God she was gonna start going on about Nancy again. He and Nance had broken up over six months before he’d even started working there so he’d really mostly been over it by then. He’d just got all weepy one day telling Linda about it though because she’d asked him why he didn’t have a girlfriend. Not really weepy but Linda’d said he’d got all weepy because she thought she was hysterical.

It wasn’t the same thing as the thing with Billy. He’d been too stupid about Nancy; he’d thought he was gonna marry her. He definitely didn’t think Bill wanted to marry him or whatever.

He didn’t know if he felt worse now or last year. It was so different. Everything with him and Bill had happened so fast and it felt so intense sometimes; sometimes it felt like it was all in his head. He’d told himself not to get too stupid about someone again and then Billy had happened and Steve’d got all stupid again in like three frickin’ days.

He’d really thought that Billy wanted to be with him too. Like maybe

he was scared but Steve could tell that Billy had wanted to be with him too. Maybe that was one of the things in his head.

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t matter,” he said again. He didn’t know what else he was supposed to do. He’d already made a fucking fool out of himself for the last three days standing outside of Billy’s apartment like he was in a cheesy romance movie or something. If it was really a romance movie he’d have gotten the guy already, right? “He said, you know, he, he said yesterday or somethin’, he told his sister I should forget about him, we shouldn’t even be together, so I guess it’s – whatever.”

“Well, do you want to be together?” Linda asked him. “Kinda sounds like you do.”

“I do, I don’t ... I don’t know.” Even now he didn’t know. He’d have to see Billy to know and that wasn’t happening. “He just – I just wanna see him, he won’t see me.” He felt like a hopeless kid again. “I just wanna know if he’s okay.”

Linda frowned. She didn’t say anything for a few moments again. She folded her napkin up, three times, carefully, into a little square. Steve appreciated it; she looked like she was thinking really hard. Finally she said, “I still think you should try flowers.”

“Um, yeah, no, he would totally kick my ass – “

“Would get him to open the door, though.” She made a silly little face; she was cracking herself up. It was so great.

Steve rubbed at his face again. He was going to give himself another migraine. He kinda already had a stress headache from not wearing his glasses. If he got both at once maybe he’d get lucky and just frickin’ die and then he wouldn’t have to be all weepy about Bill anymore.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. He said, “You know he – he said he likes lilies before or whatever.”

Linda laughed. “Well, there you go!”

“You really think I should do that?”

“What have you got to lose?”

“Uh, you know, my pride, about twenty bucks, maybe a quarter-liter of blood when he slugs me – “

Linda was eating her sandwich again. “You know, I read in a magazine last week that lilies signify devotion,” she said thoughtfully. “I think it was *Cosmo*. ”

Huh. “Huh,” said Steve.

They closed up the office and left at four. Steve drove back to Hawkins and Linda went off home to Westport. She was always telling him he needed to come and eat dinner at her place one time; Steve was getting these horror flashes of her trying to invite Billy now too.

Talking to Linda about everything had made him feel all purposeful or determined or something he guessed. He did still want Billy and he wanted them to be together. It was kind of weird that he felt so strongly about it. He usually just – gave up right away; he didn’t like trying for things and losing. When he and Nancy had had the huge fight at the party last year Steve’d thought maybe he could make it up with her. Then he’d seen her with Jonathan after he’d spent all night chasing monsters with the kids and he’d known right away that he couldn’t make it up with her. He’d just accepted it. He didn’t want to just accept it with Billy. Bill was *going* to talk to him.

He parked on Main Street and sat in his car looking at the flower shop. He felt totally determined – he’d tried about everything else. Maybe Billy would get really mad and try to beat him up again; in his weakened state Steve might even be able to get him to have an actual conversation.

The florist shop was called In Bloom and Steve had heard his mom

say that it was ‘adorable’ before. When Mom said something was *adorable* she meant *kitschy* and Steve didn’t know if that was bad or not. Either way it was the only place in town.

He felt way less determined when he walked in. He started feeling like a big dope in about a minute – he didn’t know crap about flowers. The girl at the register took pity on him and helped him pick stuff out. White lilies because they were the least girly, he figured. Steve said he had thirty bucks so she made up a huge bouquet for him.

“Lucky girl,” she said when he paid.

Steve plastered a huge fake grin on his face. “Sure is!” he said. Haha. Bill was going to murder him.

He stopped at home first so he could get Bill’s necklace and get changed before he began night four of staking out the apartment. He hadn’t worn a tie or anything today but he didn’t need to show up at Billy’s in his bumblebee polo. Billy always said that he looked like a preppy dork; Steve had no clue what Bill was doing with him.

He changed his shirt and made a face in the mirror out in the front hallway. He guessed he looked okay. Well, he looked tired and kind of sweaty because it was about a hundred degrees out already. He had big circles under his eyes; he was pale so he got them a lot. He didn’t really look like the kinda person who’d make Billy Hargrove fall all over himself trying to get.

Steve knew that he wasn’t bad-looking but he wasn’t like the handsomest guy on the planet (that was Billy). After he’d gotten his braces off when he’d been fourteen it’d been easy for him to get girls but he knew he didn’t look like a movie star or something. It was too hard for him to put on weight and he was too skinny; his mom used to pack him two lunches. He’d probably lost like eight pounds this month just being stressed out over Billy and Eleven.

He messed around with his hair in the mirror. It was definitely not a Good Steve Hair Day; he wondered what had happened to those. His hair was all puffy and his nose was too big. He kinda looked like Big Bird or something. He had a weak chin and a stupid forehead. Once

when they were kids he'd been swimming with Tommy and Carol and Carol'd said that all the moles on his back and neck looked like ticks. Steve always thought about that, even now. Maybe one day he'd have a surgery or something to get rid of them.

Okay he guessed he looked about as good as he was going to get, today at least. There was no use cryin' about it. He fed the dogs – Leia licked his arm four times instead of attacking her bowl immediately; he wondered if dogs could tell when you were nervous as heck – and went back out to his car.

The bouquet of lilies looked garish and huge in the backseat. Steve stared at them in the rearview mirror as he drove. What the hell was he doing?

He parked his car down the block and headed over to Bill's place. It was almost eight by now and the sun was slowly starting to pull down low in the sky.

Steve still wasn't sure how he felt aside from determined again. Well he felt like a huge idiot but that was about usual. He didn't know if he felt hopeful or annoyed. Maybe he was being too stupid. He definitely was. He went up the stairs holding the giant (stupid) bouquet.

It took Max a couple minutes to answer when he knocked on the door. Her eyes got huge when she saw him and her mouth actually fell open like a cartoon. She stared at the flowers for a long time. "Holy *crap*, " she said.

"Hey, Max," Steve said.

Max just kept gawping at him with wide eyes. She looked like she thought he'd gone totally nuts. Steve asked her, "Can I see your brother?"

"I ... " Max said. "Yeah, su – let me see if he's awake."

Of course. "Okay," Steve said. She closed the door in his face which was great.

After a few minutes of him standing there and sweating Max opened

the door again. She still had a weird look on her face. "Sorry, he's ... sleeping again."

"Huh, that's convenient, he seems to be sleeping a lot when I come over here."

Max bristled like a little stray dog. "Um, he does have a *concussion*, you know! He said his arm hurt, when Jonathan was here earlier and they were – " her eyes got huge and she cut herself off.

Steve stared blankly at her; he kinda heard alarm sirens going off in the back of his head. She had to be fucking joking. "Excuse me?" he said like a dramatic heroine.

Max made her goldfish face; she looked totally panicked. "No, it wasn't like – he was just – "

"Okay," Steve said over her. Okay okay. This was so great. This was like his worst nightmare actually. "Okay, so you're telling me he doesn't wanna see me at all, he's got Mike Wheeler in there and he's got Jonathan *frickin'* Byers in there – "

"He JUST brought over a couch!" Max yelped. "We didn't know he was coming here, Billy had to let him in! He drank all our stupid Nesquik!"

Steve didn't really feel the need to comment on the chocolate milk thing. "Okay, so let me in. You didn't know I was coming here." Max didn't answer him. "Look, just let me hang out on the couch until he wakes up."

Max hesitated; she swung the door further open and then stopped. "No."

"Oh my god, why are you – "

"LOOK, I'M SORRY," Max practically yelled at him. Her face turned all red and Steve felt scared. "It's not like I – you're my FRIEND, Steve, you think I don't want you guys to make up? He's being a huge baby!"

"Yeah, so just let me – "

"I CAN'T!" Max said. She sounded even more panicked which was weird. "Billy's my – look, this is *his* place. He doesn't have to let me stay here! I ... I can't let you in if he says no. I *can't*. I'm sorry."

Steve chewed on his lip and looked at her. She looked so stricken.

"Okay," he said finally. He guessed he got it; he felt really tired in two seconds. He shifted the stupid flowers in his arms. "Okay, that's okay. I'll just – wait out here."

Max stared at him incredulously. "Seriously?"

"He has to go out sometime."

"But you ... " She was just looking at him. "Okay, well, I ... I have to go to work in like an hour. I'll see what he says."

"Okay. Great."

Max didn't answer him. She stared at him for a moment more, still wide-eyed, and slowly closed the door on him again.

Steve sat down on the floor and got comfortable. He felt totally bored in two seconds. He should have brought a magazine or something.

This was totally stupid – he felt totally stupid sitting out here again. They hadn't talked for *three weeks* . Here he was with a bunch of stupid flowers when Bill was giving him every sign that he didn't give a fuck. This felt so familiar.

He just sat there like a fucking moron looking at his stupid flowers. He'd been all unwavering (another SAT word) earlier but now he was starting to feel really unsure of himself – Max had looked like she thought he was totally nuts, too.

Billy was gonna kick his ass if he ever came to the door. Steve'd thought maybe he was making some kind of big gesture but he was probably just being a moron.

What if Billy was really frickin' done with him and Steve wasn't getting the message? Well obviously he wasn't getting the message; he didn't want it. He'd thought that they shouldn't let this go but if

Billy really wanted to let it go then Steve was being a huge creep. It really wasn't a romance movie or something. Showing up four days in a row and then bringing fucking flowers when someone didn't wanna see you was called *stalking* .

Anyway here he was, with flowers, stalking. He sat and waited for a while; he counted every ceiling tile within view twice. Down the hall one of the other apartment doors opened up and someone stepped out; Steve didn't look up until they walked past. Then he did a double take.

It was their waitress from the diner, the real nice mom-like chick who was about forty and always ended up serving them. She wasn't wearing her uniform but she had it over one arm. She looked sort of pretty just wearing regular clothes. Her hair was long and blonde and fell halfway down her back.

She did a double take too, looking at him. He could see her trying to cover up her surprise. "Oh, hi there, honey," she said. "What are you doing out here?"

Steve stared up at her like a kid. He was just all sprawled out on the floor with his back against the wall. "Uh, hi," he said. "Yeah, my friend just moved in here – "

"Oh!" She gave out this short embarrassed laugh. "Right. That's right, Billy. I just saw him yesterday, guess we're neighbors now. I gave his little sister some coffee. Did you guys get into another fight or somethin'?"

He guessed she'd heard them hollering at each other at the diner before. She was looking down at the huge bouquet of flowers beside him and Steve's face burned. Holy crap he was so stupid bringing this junk here. Billy was going to kill him again, three times over. It's not like he could – lie and say they were for Max or something. That would be even creepier.

"Yeah, uh, well, I," he stuttered out like the articulate playboy he'd always aspired to be.

"What happened to him, anyway? Looks all banged up, he wouldn't

say over what.”

“Yeah, uh,” Steve said again. “Yeah, he got – crashed his car last week, uh, he’s okay, he’s not really talking to me right now – ” he cut himself off before his big dumb mouth could blab out more gay things.

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that. You guys’ll make it up.” She gave him a smile; she was looking at the flowers again.

She was quiet for a long time and Steve felt awkward again. “Those are really nice, honey,” she said softly. “You let me know if he needs something to put those in.”

Steve was just going to melt through the floor in embarrassment and die down in the lobby; that sounded good. “Uh, sure. Thanks. Thank you.”

“They don’t need too much water, should hold up through the night. I’m heading to work now, but you can just come find me in the morning if you need a vase for them.”

Jesus H Christ she thought he was going to spend the night at Billy’s. He was so stupid. Actually maybe he’d sink right through the lobby floor too and just die in the basement; that sounded better. “Okay, yeah, I’ll – ask him. Thanks.”

“I’m Donna, by the way. In case we run into each other here again.”

Donna. Not Lisa. He wasn’t sure how he could’ve come up with Lisa. Maybe one day he’d be able to pay attention to something that wasn’t just Billy again. “Steve.” He leaned up to shake her hand. She had this really amused look on her face. Jeez he was so rude, probably should have stood up to talk to her.

“See you later, Steve. I hope you get to talk to your boy.”

“Uh, me too,” Steve said like a moron. He watched her go on down the hall and disappear down the steps. He turned back to his stupid flowers.

After about a million more years Bill’s door opened up again and Max

was staring down at him *again* . “Uh, he’s still out here,” she called over her shoulder, then made a face. She stepped out and closed the door behind her. “Sorry, he’s – ”

“Yeah, I know.”

Max came over and stood looking down at him. She was wearing her red work vest from the general store and she looked all bummed out for him. “Sorry. He said he still – well, they’re just watching TV or whatever.”

Steve didn’t know who *they* was. Billy and El. Billy and *Jonathan*. It was totally dumb. “Yeah, well, I’ll just be out here.”

“Okay.” She kept on looking at him. She made the saddest goldfish face. “I’m really sorry, Steve.”

“That’s okay.” He watched her trail off down the hallway.

He sat there for a while longer trying to think of what he should do. He could just hear the TV through the door and it was starting to make him real annoyed. Bill was *right there* and he was being a fucking asshole to him. It was pretty much the story of their whole relationship. Steve didn’t even know why he was still –

He stood up again and knocked on the door; no one came over to open it. It was totally stupid. Maybe Billy was laughing at him. In his head he heard Bill say, *You think I want you?* ; he didn’t want to think about that.

He kept on knocking at the door. This was so fucking retarded; Bill was being such a fucking baby. Maybe Steve was being a – a creepy Lifetime stalker, but Billy was being a fucking baby. “Bill, are you serious?” he said through the door. “I’m not going anywhere, just fucking let me in so I can talk to you.”

No answer. He could still hear the TV though and it was pissing him off even more. He kept on knocking, even jiggled the door handle. “Come on, you can’t ignore me forever, I know where you live. You’re making me feel like shit, man.”

No answer again. Steve counted to ten in his head. He actually had to

take a breath – he felt all prickly all of a sudden for a second, kind of like when you walked into a room that was all dark. “Look, I’ve been here four days in a row, you can’t keep doing this to m – ”

There was a rush of heat and then something shoved him *hard* , almost like a punch to the gut or something. It knocked the wind out of him and sent him sprawling across the hallway. He hit the wall across from the apartment door and probably made a great sound.

Holy shit. He couldn’t breathe for a second. He felt this insane rush of anger and *hurt* around him; it wasn’t his. He couldn’t really explain it but it consumed him – his vision swam in front of him. It almost swallowed him up for a second, then went away.

It had to have been Eleven. He hadn’t really known she was over but maybe he should have known. He guessed he should feel lucky that she hadn’t squeezed his brains out.

His heart was pounding up in his throat, making him feel sick. It took him a second to sit up. He pulled the flowers out from behind his back and listened to the thrum of blood flushing about between his ears.

The TV went quiet and he could hear Billy cursing in the apartment. A second later the door flung open and then Bill was standing there staring at him. Steve almost couldn’t believe it.

Bill stared at him for a long time. His eyes went all over him. “You okay?” he said finally.

Steve stared at him too. He did look really banged up like Donna had said, like Lucas and Max had said. He had a black eye and a bunch of bruises on his face and his bottom lip was swollen; Steve couldn’t really talk for a moment. He was wearing one of his stupid romance-novel shirts all unbuttoned and he had a big white bandage on his shoulder. His left arm was in a sling. “Uh, yeah.”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to make her do that.” Bill was still staring at him so Steve made his move.

“Yeah, that’s okay.” He scrabbled up and grabbed his stupid flowers.

They'd gotten all crushed up when El had thrown him and he felt even stupider. "God, are you alright?"

"M' fine."

Great. He obviously wasn't fine. "Look, I need to talk to you, can I come in?"

Billy didn't answer him for a second. His eyes went to the flowers and then over to Steve's face and then down to the floor. "Don't think we really have anything to talk about," he said in this weird voice.

Jesus H. It'd been like two seconds and Steve was already feeling too annoyed. "Yeah, I, well, I think we do. I want to tell you – "

"I – don't wanna do this with you, Harrington." Billy was holding onto the doorknob and looking like he thought Steve was going to charge through the door or something.

"Uh, I don't, what are you – "

"I'm good, just go home, man."

Now it'd been like ten seconds and Steve was feeling even more annoyed. "Yeah, sorry, that's not going to happen, I've been out here for like an hour."

Billy didn't answer him. He was just standing there in the doorway and he looked totally overwhelmed; Steve hadn't really seen him look like that before. He didn't really look super pissed off or whatever, like Steve'd expected him to look.

"Why the fuck are you – look, why're you acting like this?"

Billy stared some more, blank. "I'm not acting like anything. I just want you to go."

"Okay, well, I, I can't go, I've been trying to see you for a fuckin' week, do you not care about that?"

He didn't answer again; his eyes shifted down and Steve was starting to feel really stupid. Still annoyed but more stupid. He didn't know

why he'd thought trying to come over here again was a good idea – it was not going well. He'd already cursed at Bill and he didn't really want to do that.

“So, okay, what, is that, that's just it?” he asked him. “What, you – so you really meant all that shit you said to me before? You don't – want me?” he blurted out like an idiot. “I mean, you don't want to see me at all or whatever?”

He felt so stupid; the words felt so stupid tumbling out of his mouth. He stood there holding the stupid flowers. Stupid.

Billy just kept looking at him in the weird way like his big eyes were gonna fall out. “No, I – “ he drew his bottom lip into his mouth; it had a big cut on it. “I do wanna see you,” he said slowly. “I didn't ... mean that stuff before.”

He sounded like it was killing him to say it. That was so great.

“All right, so?”

“So I just don't – “ Billy broke off and looked down the hall at nothing. Steve stared at his good hand gripping the edge of the door. He swung the door back and forth a couple times; Steve guessed he was deciding. “Okayoucancomein,” he muttered. He pushed the door open wider and turned away.

Steve followed him into the apartment. When you walked in there was just the big living room with its clean white walls and brown carpeting, broken up by the L-shaped kitchen in the corner.

Eleven was sitting really still on one of the couches like a little girl in a horror movie. Carol-Anne in *Poltergeist* maybe but not as blonde or small or something. The couch she was on was red leather and looked swanky. It didn't really look like something Billy would have but it also looked exactly like something Billy would have. Steve stared at it and stared at her on the couch.

El was flicking the channels on the TV; Billy stalked right over to her and snatched the remote from her. “Don't gotta do that fucking *shit* – “

"I wasn't going to really hurt him," El said. She didn't even look up from the TV. "Give me the remote."

"Take it back from me," Billy told her; El glared at him.

"I *don't* even need it," she retorted. They had this weird stare-down for a couple seconds and then Bill folded and gave her the remote back. Then he had no choice but to look back over at Steve. El looked at him too.

He felt awkward as hell and also like a huge dork, standing in the middle of the living room holding his crushed-up (stupid) flowers with the two of them staring at him. It was weird because he'd seen her here before but he hadn't really *seen* her. She already looked like she belonged here. "Hey, El."

She kept on looking at him in her unreadable way. "Hi."

"You guys okay?"

"Yes."

"Uh, okay." He had no clue what to say to her; he kind of hadn't expected her to be here even though the kids had said she'd been here like all week. He turned back to Billy. "Can we – talk somewhere?"

Billy looked annoyed instantly. God it was going so great. "What, there's nowhere to go," he muttered. He pushed past Steve anyway and walked into the little kitchen.

Steve looked around and then followed him. The place looked totally different which was stupid too. Of course it looked different. It had been empty last week when he'd come here with Max and Lucas.

There were two couches in the living room now, clearly not a matched set. There was that fancy leather one and the smaller one which was just brown. The big TV that Eleven was watching, a glass coffee table which already had a stack of magazines on it and a bunch of nail polish, probably from Max or something. A pile of books up on the counter and a couple of big boxes scattered around on the floor. The little table in the kitchen was chipped and there

were three chairs instead of four.

“Um, looks good in here,” Steve said like a moron. ”You did a lot.”

Billy wasn't looking at him but Steve was looking at Billy. He looked pretty bad. He had that bruise on his eye and another one on his cheek and that big cut on his bottom lip. His shirt was a little wrinkled; maybe he'd really been sleeping after all. Steve felt bad.

“Yeah, Max said you was here before.”

“Is that okay?”

“Doesn't matter.”

He was so infuriating, holy crap. Steve looked around some more to calm himself down. The place wasn't really decorated or anything yet but there was some weird stuff around that he wouldn't have expected Billy to have: two potted plants and a weird woven rug and a big empty bookshelf. Okay Steve could get the bookshelf. There was that little shell lamp from their house, a coffee machine that looked about forty years old. For some reason there was a stone greyhound statue on the counter.

Steve put his crushed-up flowers on the little table. Billy stared at them for a long moment. He said, “Why – why the fuck you bringin' this shit here?”

“What, you don't like them?” Steve said. “I thought you liked lilies.”

Billy didn't answer for a few seconds. He rubbed at the bruise on his jaw (one of the bruises, anyway). “I don't ... “ he mumbled slowly. “What, s'like a joke or something?”

He didn't sound like he thought it was funny or like he was pissed off like Steve'd maybe thought he'd be over it. He just sounded uncertain and ... kind of hurt. It was really weird. It was like how he'd sounded the couple of times Steve'd got really mad and yelled at him about how annoying he was being or something. He wasn't even yelling yet; he had this strong sense of foreboding that he was gonna end up yelling.

"It's not a joke, I bought them for you."

"Why?"

"Uh – I don't know." It probably wasn't a good idea to mention Linda right now. "I was worried about you – "

"Said I'm fine." Billy wasn't really looking at him; he was looking at this spot between the kitchen table and the floor. "I don't – look, we don't gotta do this okay?"

Steve stared blankly at him. Okay the hurt was gone. Back to being pissed off. "Okay, well I think you *fucking* owe it to me to at least – "

"Look, I don't know what you *want* , okay?" Billy spit out. In a minute he looked just like the angry jerk from two years ago. "You want – what, you want me to say sorry, you know I'm fucking sorry, okay. You wanna – you wanna check on me, like you, you feel bad or whatever, I'm fine, you bring these fuckin' flowers like you give a shit – "

"I do give a shit."

" – don't need you coming around here with your pity party – "

"Um, okay, shut the hell up for like one second, Jesus Christ." Steve put his hand in his hair; he wondered if anyone's cause of death had ever been *really fucking annoying boyfriend*. Ex-boyfriend. Never-been-boyfriend apparently. Whatever. "What the *fuck* are you talking about, why – "

"Look, I saw you with her," Bill said softly; Steve went quiet. Well he knew he had. "I saw you with – the girl." He could actually *see* Billy trying not to say *the Wheeler bitch*. Such restraint. "I'm not gonna – look, you don't owe me anything, okay? I know I fucked up. You don't gotta come and check on me – "

"OH MY GOD, YOU DICK!" Steve exploded; Billy looked up and stared at him. "I'm not CHECKING ON you like you're a fucking baby, why the hell are you talking about NANCY? I TOLD MAX I didn't do anything with her!"

"I – " Billy actually looked kind of overwhelmed; it was a new look on him. "I just – "

"You're TOTALLY FUCKING impossible, you know you – you – you haven't talked to me in *weeks* and you've got me over here feeling like I need to say SORRY to you – "

His eyes were so big; they were so blue. "You don't gotta say sorry – "

"Jesus Christ, I've – I've been trying to see you for a fucking week," Steve told him. He felt so helpless; he wanted to grab him. The way Billy looked it seemed like he'd break apart if he grabbed him. "I thought you – were *dead* – I was going *crazy* – "

"I'm *sorry*, " Billy said in the overwhelmed voice. He looked frozen, leaning back against the countertop with his good hand gripping the side of it so hard his knuckles were white. "I don't – uh, I don't – "

You don't what? You don't want me? Eleven was sliding up off the couch before Steve could answer; she came around to the other side of the countertop and stood parallel to them. "I should ... go home now," she said in her weird little voice. It was strange – El wasn't that little, not really, not for a thirteen-year-old. She looked younger, though, even though she was kind of tall. Even when her voice got loud it seemed small.

Billy looked over at her, saved. "What? Nah, you can, you can stay."

"Maybe you should talk to him."

Billy looked less saved. "I – yeah, gimme a minute, I'll give you a ride."

El frowned. "You just took those pills," she told him. "You're not supposed to drive."

"Uh, what pills?" Steve asked loudly; Billy slid his eyes over towards him in a cautious way.

He still wasn't quite looking at Steve. It was too weird – Billy always looked at him and looked at him. Right now he kinda looked like

Luke or Leia after Steve'd yelled at them for going in the trash or something, all hurt and confused. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, tell me I'm still good!* Steve always did.

"Doctor gave 'em to me," he said shortly. "For my arm and shit, I'm not fucking doing drugs with the kid around so you don't gotta – "

"Okay, I asked ONE question," Steve interrupted before he could start going off.

"Jim said he's not supposed to drive."

Billy looked irritated. "I can still take you, I'm fine."

"What about your car, is it even – "

"It's fine."

"I'll – I'll take her home," Steve offered. "Uh. If I can come back."

Billy didn't answer him for a long time. "If you want."

"All right, a little more specific would be really great – "

"You can come back," Billy said shortly.

"Okay. I, GAH – " Steve said. Eleven had appeared right next to him holding her little string backpack; it was green and purple. She seemed to have a lot of backpacks. "Jesus, how did you do that?"

El stared blankly. "Do what?"

"I – God, nothing. Nevermind. Are you – you ready?" She looked at him like he was dumb. "Okay." He turned back to Billy. "Uh, do you – "

"I gotta shower," Billy muttered.

"Are you gonna let me back in?"

He still wasn't looking at him. "Yeah, I'll leave the door open."

Steve stared blankly too. "You – really?"

“What?”

“I – “ *You just got abducted, you stupid fucking asshole.* “Okay, yeah. Whatever.”

“Whatever,” Billy said too. He looked at El. In a few seconds he looked totally different; Steve stared at him. “Gonna be okay?” he asked quietly.

“Yes.” She was putting her little backpack on. “I can come back Tuesday at four.”

“Yeah, okay. If you want.”

“I want to watch more *General Hospital*, ” El said; Billy looked pained.

Huh. “Did you guys watch that together?” Steve asked.

“I – no,” Billy lied.

“Four episodes,” El said.

“All right,” said Billy loudly in his new stilted voice. “This is fucking great, I’m, I’m showering.” He wandered off down a little hallway that Steve hadn’t even noticed which was dumb. Of course there were bedrooms and stuff.

El was looking at him; he tried to smile. “Okay, so you want – “ she turned and crossed the living room without him, then opened the door in that strange precise manner she had that he couldn’t even put into words. “Yep, okay,” Steve said. He followed her out.

El didn’t say anything as they walked down the narrow hallway and then the steep little flight of steps; she turned left onto the sidewalk without him telling her. She knew right where his car was parked because of course she would. She got in without saying anything.

Okay. He got into the car too.

Steve had been around Eleven probably – he didn’t know. God, it was weird to think of it. He usually tried not to think of her. Eight or nine times in the last year maybe. Maybe even that was a high number.

Even so she always seemed to be around: the kids always talked about her; Billy liked her and Steve still had no clue how that'd happened. He didn't think he'd ever been alone with her for more than a minute or two.

He put the Beamer in drive and tried not to feel weird as hell alone with her in his car. He wondered if she was reading his mind or something; apparently she could do that. "Are you – you doing okay?" he asked her as he drove; he should ask her.

El had her little backpack folded across her stomach. She was touching all the buttons on the radio without actually changing the station. "Yes." She said like she'd been rehearsing, "Fine, thank you."

"Okay," Steve said. "Is – uh, is Billy okay?"

She didn't answer for a moment. "Billy's always okay."

Steve chewed on his lip. "Yeah, I know that."

El didn't say anything else so Steve drove on down Broad Street and onto Main.

He was trying to tell himself not to feel so fucking awkward. Why did he always have to think about everything so much?

He should say something else to her. What the fuck was he supposed to say; apparently she'd just killed like ten people.

"I killed four people," El said. "Jim killed one."

"Uhhhmygod okay," said Steve.

"I killed more before," El told him. "You know that."

"Yep." He wondered if she was gettin' ready to squeeze his brains out.

"You're scared of me," she said slowly. "I – know. I don't want to hurt friends. You're my friend." Suddenly she looked about to cry; Steve had a little panic as he turned down Redwood Lane. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I won't anymore."

“Oh, hey. Look, I, I know that – “

“Billy thinks about you a lot,” El told him out of nowhere. “He has for a long time. He’s really hurt.”

“He didn’t look that bad – “ Okay he looked pretty bad.

“That’s not what I mean,” El said; he knew that. “Can you make him not be hurt?”

Jesus Christ. “I, yeah, I want to do that – “

“It really hurts,” El said; he had no clue what she was talking about. “Sometimes I want to be mean too.”

“Yeah, I, okay, I get that.”

She was looking at her little backpack, twisting the strings of the straps around her fingertips. Steve saw she had on her old blue bracelet from Hopper again – Mike must’ve given it back to her. She had those leather ones that Billy and Max had picked out for her on now too, pink and teal.

“I saw what he said to you before,” she said. “I ... saw you in the gym with Lucas.”

Steve stared blankly. “He – told you about that?”

“No,” El said. She kept on playing with her backpack. She said, “When I couldn’t – “ she took a breath – “there was a girl.” Steve didn’t know what she was talking about. “I couldn’t use my – Mike says I have ... powers, but it’s just who I – am. It’s ... me. When I couldn’t move anything, I could see more things. Billy says I was in overdrive,” she said; Steve almost smiled. “That’s why I could – see things you were doing. Where you ... were. I just had to think about it. Or when you could see me. I didn’t mean to give you bad dreams. You had a lot of them.”

God. Steve didn’t say anything.

She said, “Billy and I ... were ... alone for a long time. I didn’t want him to be alone. I could go in my mind and see him. He thought

about you a lot. I don't think he – meant what he said to you.”

Really Steve didn't need relationship advice from a thirteen-year-old girl, or for her to try and fix his fucking relationship. Billy was an adult; he could own up to his own shit if he wanted to make it work with Steve. Even now, even after how worried he'd been, there was a part of him that was still really hurt and mad. “Yeah, I already know he didn't mean it. He still fuckin' said it,” Steve said before he remembered that he usually tried not to curse around the kid.

Two of her fingers were red; she unwrapped the strings from around them and flexed her hand. “But he was afraid,” she said like she was explaining the inner workings of Billy. “Sometimes I ... we – do things we don't want to when we're afraid.”

Goddamn it was so beautiful – he almost couldn't take it. Steve drummed his hands on the steering wheel. They were almost back to Hopper's place. “Look, El, okay. I really appreciate you havin' this big relationship talk with me,” he said. Some sarcasm seeped into his voice though he didn't mean it to. “I'm really glad you guys are okay. I was really worried about you. I know you and Bill are thick as thieves – ”

“You *don't* have to *make fun* of – “ She was making a little face.

“I'm not making fun of you! I'm just telling you!” He parked in the gravel driveway. “Billy doesn't need you to – uh, apologize for him or whatever – “

“I'm *not* doing that.”

“ – he can talk to me if he wants, he didn't want to talk to me all week.”

“Yes he did!” El said; Steve didn't know.

“Look, I care about him, I bought him flowers!” Steve told her. “That shit cost me like thirty bucks, I go all out.”

“I know!” The kid's eyes were all wide like it was important to her that Steve knew she cared that he went all out. “They were – really pretty. Before I crushed them in the door. I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, well.” He didn’t know what to say again. He thought it before he even meant to: *maybe that’s what you do, you just fucking crush shit.*

He recoiled in on himself. He didn’t want to think that way about her. He didn’t mean to. He didn’t fucking know what she could hear now or whatever and he felt like total trash.

El stared at him with her big eyes. Her pupils were so dark, these gaping wounds. “I’m *sorry.* ”

“That’s, that’s okay, it doesn’t matter.” It was too stupid, talking to a little kid about his fucking *not-relationship* . Who else could he talk to. “You know, I, I, I know you’re young and all, you’ve been going around with Mike for forever. Billy’s nothing like that. He won’t even – say we’re together, how’m I supposed to – I can’t even talk to – how can I be with someone like that?”

“I don’t know.” She wasn’t frowning or anything but she looked sad somehow. She usually did. “But he does want to be together.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Do you want to?” She paused. “Be together?”

People kept asking him that. He’d thought he’d wanted to. He’d been so scared about Billy being hurt or upset about him and Max had said that he’d been coming to talk to Steve but it didn’t seem like he’d wanted to talk to Steve. Bill’d just had a great time today hanging out with frickin’ *Jonathan Byers* apparently but he didn’t want to talk to Steve. “I *did*,” he said like a hopeless loser.

“Do you think he could get better?”

“I, I don’t know, El.” He’d thought Billy *had* been getting better; well he’d always been rough but Steve had thought he’d been good all along. He’d really thought – well, he’d thought a lot of shit. “Sorry, I know you want us to be boyfriends or whatever.”

“Maybe ... if you talked, you could ... compromise.”

“Yeah, I – “ like usual he didn’t have a clue what she meant. “I dunno, guess I’ll see what he says.”

The porch light over at the house flickered on and Steve could see the outline of Hopper in the front screen of the door, smoking and impatient. El clicked her seatbelt and shrugged it off. "Don't be too mean," she said; she was asking.

"Yeah, I – I won't be too mean." He didn't really want to be mean at all.

Her little brown eyes were burning a hole through him. "Promise."

"Yeah, okay." She just looked at him. "What, I promise!"

"Okay." She looked at him for a while longer and then got up out of the car. Steve watched her trail over the gravel driveway and flock up the steps to Hopper like a little baby bird.

Hop raised a hand to him. Steve raised one back and then turned the key in the ignition again.

It didn't take him that long to get back to Bill's even though he tried to drive slow. There were a lot more cars parked on the street now so Steve drove his car into the alleyway. He took his time walking back to the apartment and up the steps. Thought about knocking again but didn't want to chance it.

He turned the doorknob. It was unlocked like Bill had said so he walked on in. The TV was off now but a little light was on. Steve could hear the showering running. He sat down on the weird leather couch (it was pretty comfortable) and waited.

Bill came out a few long moments later; his hair was wet and he was wearing the same jeans he had been in earlier, the ones with all the holes in them that Steve liked. He stopped in the hallway for a second when he noticed Steve, like he was surprised, then walked slowly out into the living room. "Sorry," he muttered. "Took too long."

"Uh, no, you're fine."

Billy chewed on his lip and didn't say anything; any other time he'd

make some comment like *Tell me about it*. He fiddled with his shirt for a couple seconds. He had his arm-sling on again too and it took him a long time to do the buttons up with one arm. He had a new bandage on over his collarbone; Steve stared at it.

“Do you – need help – ?”

“I’m okay,” Billy said right away.

“Okay.”

He watched Billy do up the buttons on his shirt. It took a while. He kept not looking at anything and biting his split lip – Steve didn’t know how it didn’t hurt. There was something so different about him and Steve didn’t know what it was. It kinda broke his heart in this really small way. It felt like he was being cracked right down the middle, like when you hurt your back. He didn’t know what it was.

Billy seemed so much smaller than before. Probably he’d lost weight – well, he had, you could tell, and it wasn’t as if he’d had much to lose – but it was different than that. He just stood there after he’d finished doing up his shirt. He looked totally lost.

“Uh, can you sit down?” Steve asked him; Billy startled a little like he was in a daze.

“I – yeah, okay.” Bill sat down next to him. He was chewing his split lip again.

He looked so unlike himself; Steve didn’t know what to say now. “You cut your hair,” he said.

Billy looked surprised. He scrubbed his hand through the back of his way shorter hair – no more ponytail. “Yeah,” he said finally. “Uh, they cut it when I was in the hospital. Looked like a fuckin’ moron til about four days ago.”

“Why’d they cut it?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. “Too much blood and stuff in it.”

Oh. Right. God. Steve stared at him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” Now he looked uncomfortable. “I’m fine.”

“Uh. Okay. So I guess – El’s been hanging out with you?”

Billy looked more uncomfortable. “Yeah, she’s been here.”

“She’s not hanging out with you tomorrow?”

“Chief wants to take her to some tutor. Might do summer school or whatever. She takes these tests, she can go to school in the fall. Maybe seventh grade or somethin’.”

“Oh,” Steve said blankly. “That’s, that’s good, right?” No answer. Bill was being so weird right now. “Uh, I don’t know what to ... “

Billy interrupted him. “Look, uh, I just. I dunno what they told you, I didn’t – I didn’t take the kid or nothin’ – “

“Oh, man, I know that,” Steve told him. “We – I mean, we all know that.”

“Keep waitin’ for someone to be pissed off at me. Figured it’d be you.”

He thought so highly of Steve like usual. “No one’s, uh, no one’s mad at you about that.”

Billy didn’t answer him again; he wasn’t looking at him either. He was just staring straight ahead in this strange blank way. He worried at his bottom lip with his tongue for a moment. “S’my fault though.”

“Ummm,” said Steve. He still wasn’t really sure what had happened. Just the little bit that Hopper had told him, what the kids had told him. He still didn’t really know if he *wanted* to know. “I don’t – ”

“I was driving and I saw her,” Bill told him. He was still staring blankly ahead at the television. “I just, uh – too fuckin’ stupid. I should’a just taken her home. I didn’t know.”

“Bill, I think, uh, I think those people – I think they would’ve taken her anyway.”

“I still could’a taken her home.”

“Well, then she would have been alone,” Steve said. Billy didn’t answer him. “Look, obviously no one blames you, I mean she was just here so it’s not like – “

“Yeah, she can go wherever she wants now. Got her powers back.”

“Sure, okay.” He still had no clue what the fuck had happened with that. “Yeah, I really don’t – how, uh, exactly did that happen?”

“There was this girl,” Bill told him and stopped. He licked his lips. “They had this little kid.” He stopped again. He said, “She was. They. I, I. I really don’t – uh, I really can’t – “

He looked like he was getting kind of freaked out or panicked so Steve said, “Okay, uh, we, we don’t have to talk about that.”

“Okay,” he said softly. He leaned back against the couch. His voice was so quiet and it made Steve feel weird. “What do you wanna talk about?”

“I don’t – uh, can you look at me?”

“Okay,” Billy said again. He did look up then and Steve felt this shock go through him. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that he could feel this way just looking at Billy. It wasn’t fair. “I dunno what you – “

Steve reached out and gripped his forearm hard; Bill stopped and just looked at him. “I was so fucking worried about you,” he blurted out.

Billy had the overwhelmed look on his face again like he had when they’d been out in the hallway. He looked like a scared rabbit about to bolt. “Yeah, I, I’m – fine.”

“I thought you were *dead*, ” Steve told him. “I thought I was never gonna see you again.”

Billy laughed like it hurt him; Steve wondered if he should let his arm go. “Uh, do you want to?”

“Yeah, of course I do, you moron,” Steve said. He felt really crazy

and almost panicked for a second; it was like seeing Billy sitting there was just bringing back how totally screwed up and scared he'd felt all week. "Do you think I don't frickin' care about you or something?"

"I dunno."

He wasn't looking at Steve again. The only light on in the room now was from that stupid little shell lamp. It had a warm glow and it made all the bruises on his face look really awful.

Steve reached out to touch his face and turn it towards himself; Bill flinched once but didn't move away. He just stared at Steve in his new small confused way. God, his face was pretty bad. "Uh, which one of those is from me?"

"What?" His brow drew down and he shifted away a little. Not completely. Steve was still touching him. They were just a couple inches apart on the couch but it felt really far. "Oh. Uh, I dunno. Think that's gone now."

"I'm really sorry, I never should have done that to you," Steve told him.

"That's okay. I deserved it."

Steve didn't answer him for a second; he really had no clue what he wanted to say. *What about all the other times you didn't deserve it.* God. He probably shouldn't start that right now. "I still shouldn't have done that. I never wanted to hit you like that. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, that's okay." Billy looked kind of tired and hunched in on himself. It was too weird. He usually had this weird lazy grace that Steve admired; it was borne from not giving a fuck about anything – he always looked like he belonged about anywhere. That was gone now, and he just seemed small. "You don't gotta feel bad or whatever."

"I – "

"Look, I got – um, I guess I got ... shit to say to you, okay?" Billy interrupted him. His voice sounded stilted again. "Can I say it before I get too doped up?"

“Uh, yeah, I guess – “ Finally Steve managed to release his grip on his arm. “I – sorry, go ahead – “

Billy didn't say anything; his eyes flicked from Steve's face down to his hand on the couch now. “I was, uh, comin' to talk to you,” he said slowly. “Last Saturday.” He thought about it. “Two Saturdays.”

“Oh. Yeah, I, I know that –”

“Wanted to say sorry to you.”

“You don't have to do that – ” It was like this automatic response or something; he hated making people apologize to him. Wasn't this what he'd wanted?

Billy laughed again, this really rough noise. “Uh, yeah I do.”

“I just mean, look, I mean I know – “

“No, you don't know,” Billy interrupted him. He pressed his lips together hard; they turned white and then pink again. “I – I'm real sor – “

“Yeah, I *know*, look – “

“You don't know,” Billy said again, real short. “Thought you said I could talk.”

“Okay, okay. I am.”

“I was, um. I just got scared. I was – ”

“I figured – “ Wow he really couldn't shut his mouth.

Bill talked over him. “And then I got m – mad. When the kid saw us. I got mad that he saw us. And then I – got mad because you, you heard me say that shit to him. I didn't mean – I didn't mean it.” His eyes flicked away. “I don't know.”

“I ... “ Steve didn't really know what to say. God he'd almost forgot and he still didn't want to talk about it, talk about Lucas. The way Bill'd sounded, so disgusted, so dismissive, the ugly curl of his lip.

What he is, ain't he?

He guessed they were going to talk about it. "Uh, yeah, look – it doesn't really matter if you meant it or not, Lucas is – he's just a fucking kid, Bill, you can't just say shit like that and – "

"Yeah, I fucking *know* that, okay?" Billy snapped out with force before he seemed to recoil, curling in on himself a little. "I know that," he said again. "I talked to him already, I was comin' to talk to you." He was looking at Steve's arm on the couch again. "So we're cool I think. Said sorry to him."

Steve guessed he was never really going to find out what had gone down between the two of them. Maybe nothing, if Bill was really sorry. "He said you owe him rides to school or something."

Billy looked up, surprised. "I – yeah. Dunno why he wants that, I already missed like half of 'em. Dunno what he's gonna want me to do now."

"I don't – "

"Gave me like this comic when I was in the hospital," Billy continued in his weird voice, like he was recalling a dream. Steve's heart clenched thinking about him in the hospital. He'd probably hated it. "It was pretty good."

Still he had no clue what to say. He didn't really know anything about Billy and Lucas – he always tried not to think of them. Then again, when he thought about it, he didn't know too much about Lucas at all.

He knew he liked Star Wars and Michael Jackson. He knew he liked Dig-Dug at the arcade. He knew he liked Max. He didn't know he liked comics. "Okay, was it Aquaman?"

Billy laughed. "No, you fag," he said automatically, then winced. "I – fuck – sorry – "

"Uh, it's – "

"No, I don't–" He stopped. "I'm real sorry," he managed. It was like

he could barely push the words out. "I don't – I'm sorry I called you that. Before. I didn't – didn't – "

"Yeah, I just, uh look, I know, okay?" Steve told him. This wasn't what he had intended to tell him. "I already know you don't – you could have just fucking talked to me, Bill. You can't keep...doing this shit to me. Every time you get mad or whatever, you keep – pushing at me – "

"I know." He bit his lip again. "I know. I know I fucked it up with you."

"Yeah, you did," Steve told him. He didn't really want to tell him and that was so stupid. He guessed that before he'd had this whole thing rehearsed and now he didn't want to say it; he'd kinda wanted to make Bill really sorry. He didn't really want that anymore. Billy looked so hurt and he just looked like Billy. He always looked like a little kid when he was hurt and it always made Steve want to forgive him in two seconds.

It wasn't fair. He knew that he'd already forgiven Billy because he was a freaking moron but it still hurt. What was it they said? Forgive but don't forget. Was it still supposed to hurt? "I mean, I don't – do you just want to me to go or whatever?"

Billy stared at him for a couple seconds and Steve didn't think he was gonna answer at all. Sometimes he did that. Then he said, "No I don't want you to go."

"You didn't even want to let me in," Steve pointed out. "You made me feel like a moron all week."

"Yeah, I know I did that."

"I mean, you – " He didn't even know what to say. "You said all this fucking shit to me, and then I just – I didn't know where you were – "

"I know," Billy said. "I know I fucked it up with you."

"It doesn't really matter anymore."

"Yeah. I know." He looked sad. "But I'm still ... sorry. All that – shit I

said, that shit I called you. I didn't mean it. It was just." He didn't say anything for a long time. "Was just shit I don't like about myself."

"I ... " One day he was gonna remember words and how to say them. "Bill, that's okay. I mean, I know that."

Billy gave him a look. He still looked kind of uncertain and he looked real sulky, too. "How come you're bein' so nice to me?" he asked suddenly. He seriously sounded like a little kid.

"Well, I like you," Steve told him; Billy just stared blankly. "I – uh, I mean, I guess I can go easy on you and all since you almost died – "

"I didn't fuckin' die, I was stuck in a basement for five days," Billy said.

Jesus. God. "Do you – are you – do you want to talk about that?"

"Not really," Billy said flatly. He hesitated. "I mean, I can if you want."

"Uh, that's okay. I mean, whenever you want." Part of him was dying to know more about what had happened and part of him really didn't want to know at all. Maybe that was selfish or whatever. Both parts.

Billy didn't answer him for a long time; Steve sat and waited. Finally he said, "Look, uh, I wanted to come and say sorry to you, guess I said sorry. I just want you to know I didn't mean that shit I said to you. I didn't mean to treat you like shit the whole time."

"Uh. It wasn't the whole time – "

"Yeah. Basically was."

Steve didn't really know what to say because he didn't really know what Billy was trying to say. "Well, it doesn't – it doesn't have to be like before."

"Right," Billy said in his new weird voice. He scratched at his eyebrow, the one with the little scar on it. He did that a lot when he didn't know what to say. "So you wanna be like friends or somethin'?"

“I, uh – “ Steve almost laughed. “Yeah, I don’t know if I can just be friends with you.” Billy just stared at him in this really blank way and it made him feel super weird. “I mean, I mean we could start over, I guess. If you want.”

He chewed on his lip; he wasn’t looking at Steve again. “Thought we did that second chances shit already.”

“Yeah, well, I tend to go easy on people when they’re goin’ out with me. I’m kind of a lot. You get like four other chances,” Steve said; Billy stared at him some more. “I mean I know you said we aren’t going out or whatever – “

“No, we were,” Billy muttered. “I don’t – I don’t know why I said that fucking shit to you. I just wanted to – I knew you’d always – ” he stopped.

“What?” Steve urged him. “What, what do you – “

“Look, I saw you with her,” he said again real quiet. “I get it, okay. I mean, I still think you can do better – ”

Oh. Nancy. Steve tugged on his hair. “Okay, wait, no. Look, you really think that – “

“Won’t like give you shit or anything, you – you wanna be with your girl or whatever.”

He wondered if Bill had actual brain damage or something and Max had just neglected to tell him this. He didn’t understand why Bill kept talking about Nancy. Unless he –

Billy said, “I always knew you wanted to get back with her, be easy for you.”

“Yeah, that’s not what happened, if you would let me talk for once – “

“No, I’m, I’m, I’m not like you, man.” His left arm twitched in the sling like he wanted to move it; he rubbed at his eyebrow with his other hand again instead. He looked so small; Steve’d never seen him look so small before. It was totally weird. “I can’t just – I’m not

gonna, can't go out and find some nice girl to get over you with."

I don't want you to get over me. "Uh, Bill, there's no – "

Billy kept talking over him. "Look, I don't ... like both like you do, okay?" He had this little frown on his face; he huffed out a breath like he wanted to laugh. "I don't really...like anybody like that, I guess. You're the – only person I ever really wanted. You're the only person I ever really liked like that."

Steve stared at him blankly.

"So I don't – I don't got any – maybe you'll still, uh, wanna hang out with me sometime or whatever," Billy managed. "I won't say nothing about her to you – "

"Bill, Jesus, I didn't get back with Nancy, I didn't do anything with her!" Steve told him. "I fucking told you that already!"

It was like he wasn't hearing what Steve was saying. "Look, I saw you guys, you look real nice together – "

"Jesus Christ, you dumb piece of shit!" He was blurting it out without meaning to; he didn't really want to talk to Billy like this right now. "You FUCKING ripped my heart out three weeks ago, you think I'm gonna get back with the person who did the SAME FUCKING THING to me?"

"I – " Billy stared at him some more; his mouth moved but no sound came out. "I didn't – "

"She just fucking kissed me, she just wanted to hook up with me, she was fucking BORED. Was I supposed to throw her off the porch?"

"I dunno. I would'a."

Steve rolled his eyes. "No you wouldn't have," he said. Not if it'd been Billy's girl, that girl he'd had back home that he was all messed up over still. Tracey. Billy'd loved her; he and Max never shut the fuck up about her. "What about your girlfriend? What if, uh, Tracey came to see you?"

Bill stared at him sharply. Steve wondered if he was about to get pissed off, but he didn't answer him for a couple seconds. He rubbed his shoulder through the shirt where the horrible bandage was. He was chewing on the corner of his bottom lip again and his eyes focused on something a little to the right of Steve. "Yeah, here's the thing," he said in his weird blank voice. "That was my girl, but that was kinda the problem, ya know."

"Uh, yeah, I, I don't get you."

Billy rolled his eyes. "She was, ah. Kinda missing this ... important piece of equipment."

"Oh, okay," Steve said blankly too. Bill just stared at him and Steve stared too. Then: Oh. OH! He meant a dick. Okay. "OH!" he said again like a moron. "Oh. Okay. Uh, so you just, you just like ... "

"Yeah."

"Oh, okay," he said again, probably too fast. "Sorry, I – yeah, I didn't know that."

"Yeah, that's okay. I never told you I was queer."

Holy shit. Okay. He felt too surprised; he hadn't know. Then he felt really stupid. He should have known, shouldn't he?

"Um, okay," Steve said. God he was real wordy and suave right now; he didn't know how Bill wasn't, like, climbing on him. "Sorry, I just – uh. Okay, wow." *Shut up*, he begged himself. Jesus. "I – sorry, I, I really thought you liked girls."

Billy stared like Steve had said something dumb. "I do like girls," he said. "I just don't like fuckin' them."

"Oh," Steve said stupidly. Oh. "Okay. Well, uh, yeah, I mean that's, that works for me." That was half of the population he didn't have to worry about now.

Bill just looked at him some more and then closed his eyes for a couple seconds like looking at Steve was too tiring or something. He leaned back against the couch. "Man, we really don't have to do this,

okay?”

Steve rubbed his face. “I really have no clue what the fuck you’re talking about – “

“Look. Steve.” Steve stared at him; he could count on both hands the number of times Bill had called him by his first name. “I *saw* you guys, okay?” Billy told him for like the eightieth time. “I just, ah ... I thought maybe – you’d wanna talk to me still. I was coming to see you, I seen you guys hooking up.”

“I did want to talk to you,” Steve told him. “I didn’t do anything with her, Bill. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Billy’s eyes shifted down so that he had to look at Steve even less; he looked at the couch and then at the coffee table. “S’okay if you did.”

“Yeah, well, I, I, I didn’t.” He didn’t know how many times he was supposed to say it. Maybe Bill wasn’t really hearing it or maybe he was too looped up already or something. He always got so crazy over Nancy and Steve’d never really understood it; Billy acted like he didn’t care about anything. *You’re the only person I ever really wanted.* He couldn’t really mean that.

“That’s okay.”

Steve stared at him. “Do you think I’m lying?” he asked; Billy didn’t answer him. “I’m not lying.” Billy didn’t answer him some more. “Wait,” Steve said. “Is this – do you really think I’m, I’m with Nancy again or something? Is that why you didn’t wanna see me?”

Billy didn’t answer him for a couple seconds; he smiled like it hurt him. Finally he said, “You know I’m a fuckin’ coward, right. You said it.”

“Oh, my god, Bill,” Steve said. “Are you fucking – look, I’m not, I’m not getting back with Nancy, I told you like eighty times I didn’t – that was, uh, a mistake, okay, I haven’t even SEEN HER – “

Billy continued to roll his eyes and infuriate him. “Look, we really don’t gotta do this,” he said again. “I know you’re all worried about me or whatever. That’s really nice. I’m fine, you can get back with

your girl. Said I won't – “

“Oh, my god, can you just FUCKING let me talk – ”

“I am letting you talk!” Bill said all grumpy like an eight-year-old. “We’ve *been* talkin’. I’m just saying that I – ”

Jesus H. Billy was so stupid; he was like the stupidest eight-year-old on the planet. If there were retarded kids in other solar systems Bill was one of them too.

Steve didn't really understand it. How Billy could think that he would get back together with Nancy? It made him feel really horrible sitting here and looking at Billy all busted up, acting like he was a, a fucking burden or something that Steve had to check up on because he felt *bad* .

Their fight had been one thing – one really fucking horrible thing – but it was totally crazy. The thought that Steve would ever pick Nancy over him. After what he'd ... had with Bill. After all the stuff they'd done. Not just the sexy stuff but all the other stuff too. Like stuff before they'd even hooked up. When Steve had stayed over and they'd watched all these horrible movies with Max or when they'd been in the woods smoking together and Bill had told him about his mom. All the times they'd met at the diner, like, not even with the kids; Steve would do Bill's math homework and Bill would laugh real loud at his stupid stories about his job. When he'd fixed Steve's car and picked him up from work.

He hadn't done that stuff with *Nancy* . He hadn't even – been around Nancy in forever aside from that one stupid fucking day two weeks ago; he hadn't seen Nancy, he hadn't thought about Nancy. He had so much more of Billy than he'd ever had of Nancy. It was crazy to think about it that way, and he hadn't before. He felt like he was having some big realization on the red leather couch. It was just totally shitty, Billy had to think Steve was totally shitty if he really thought Steve would do something like that.

Billy was STILL talking. He was still saying some crap about how maybe they could hang out or something; Steve wasn't really hearing it. He felt fuzzy like when he tried too hard to read over the reports

at his job at the end of the week, like fuzzy in his brain and in his eyes.

“No no no no please stop fuckin’ talking,” Steve said rapidly. He grabbed Bill’s arm again in the hopes that it’d make him shut up; it did. “Look, yeah, I kissed Nancy, I was, I was pissed off at you and, and she was right there, but I couldn’t – I just – ”

Okay the arm thing stopped working. “Just thought it’d be easier if you got back with her – ”

Steve felt like laughing again; he probably had a really stupid look on his face. “Do you think I like easy?” he asked Billy. “I literally can’t stop thinking about you, I didn’t do anything with her, I TOLD HER ABOUT YOU, ASSHOLE!” He really hadn’t meant to swear.

Billy stopped and stared at him. “You did?” He had the hurt puppy look again; Steve didn’t know why. He was probably yelling too much. He didn’t look mad like Steve had thought he might be.

“Yeah, sorry, she wants to know if you have any tattoos.”

“Do you want me to get a tattoo?” Bill asked blankly.

“Yeah, you can get my name on your ass,” Steve told him; Billy just looked like he wasn’t sure if Steve was joking. “Jesus, I don’t – I don’t care, I just want you.”

Bill had that mistrustful look on his face again like he thought Steve was screwing around with him or something. He always acted like he was so tough but you could see everything on his face anyway. He lowered his head and looked down at the couch, then he looked up again. “Okay,” he managed finally. He said, “I can – I can do better.”

“Can you?”

“Get a tattoo if you want.”

Steve huffed out a laugh. “Okay, uh, maybe start smaller,” he said. Bill made this face that was almost a smile; it looked like it hurt him.

Steve kept on going. He had to get this out. “Look, I just – all I need

is for you not freak out on me again, I seriously, I seriously cannot keep doing this shit with you – “

“I know. I’m sorry.” Billy looked up at him and it felt like his eyes were burning into his. “I – know I shouldn’t – s’fucked up, I w... wanted you to be mad like I was, but I didn’t – I don’t fucking know why I ... “ he trailed off.

It really hurts. Sometimes I want to be mean too . Jesus. Okay he got it now. Billy said, “So do you want me to – “ and Steve leaned in and kissed him. Billy made a sound and fumbled between them; for a second Steve thought he was gonna push him away or something but he just gripped his t-shirt hard. “I – “ he said against Steve’s mouth so Steve kissed him again.

He hadn’t really meant to kiss him or to keep doing it. Okay he always wanted to kiss Billy. It was just this thing that happened whenever he was in the room; it wasn’t fair. Billy just looked – he just looked so uncertain. He looked so hurt. He looked like he expected Steve to punch him in the face again or something. The thought that maybe there was a part of Billy that always felt that way was too much; it hurt Steve too. He didn’t want to punch him. He wanted him to stop looking like that.

It felt like they were tied together on a string or something. It was so tight it was gonna snap; it was definitely going to snap if he stopped touching Billy or kissing Billy so he didn’t stop. Billy held onto his shirt so hard his hand was shaking; Steve could feel it between them. Oh God. Billy.

They kissed for a while; Steve kissed him and Billy kissed him back. Holy crap Steve had really missed kissing him. It kind of felt like a dream or something because nothing could really be so good. They had to go kind of slow because of Bill’s split lip. He kept making these little sounds and he was breathing kind of hard. Somehow they had gotten so close on the couch; Steve could feel Bill’s heart pounding away against his chest.

Billy put his hand on the side of Steve’s face and then in his hair which felt nice and he kissed him again. His body felt too warm and his face was kind of scruffy; Steve was into it. He guessed Bill

couldn't really shave that great with his arm being all fucked up.

Billy kissed him again. "Thought about you, when I was—" he muttered. "Missed you."

"Yeah, me too." Steve kissed him again too, touched the bandage on the edge of his shoulder. Bill felt so hot, like he had a fever or something. He was right there. Steve had a big dumb face and a stupid mouth but Billy's dumb face was perfect for it; they were a really good match.

"Do whatever you want. I'll tell whoever you want."

"Okay," Steve mumbled into his mouth. Then he thought, *Oh*. He pulled back a little. "Uh, so the... kids kinda found out too and I – "

"Yeah, I heard about that. S'okay."

"I got, uh, I got your necklace, I can give it back to you now."

Billy looked confused. "My – what?"

"You – El did this weird – I don't know how the fuck she – she gave, she sent Mike this stuff, he gave me your pendant or whatever. When you guys were. Um, gone."

He just sat there looking totally blank. Steve said, "Did you not notice it was missing?"

"Just thought it came off in the car or something."

"Oh, well. I have it. I kind of flipped out, Max said I have no chill. Sorry. Uhhh. They all know now."

"That's okay. I don't, uh. I don't care anymore."

"Okay," Steve said too. He didn't really know what to say again. Bill had cared a lot two weeks ago; so much had happened. He shifted over suddenly to reach into his pocket. "Sorry, I've been keeping it – uh – yeah, here – "

He handed the pendant over and Bill held it awkwardly in his right

hand. He was left-handed and super defensive about it; Steve thought it was so cute. Bill struggled with the necklace so Steve helped him put it on.

Billy kept his head bowed for a minute. "Thanks," he said, so quietly Steve almost missed it. He looked up again; his eyes were so blue.

"Uh, sure." They just looked at each other again. It felt weird now that they weren't kissing, kind of like how it'd been in the first couple weeks after they'd hooked up.

Bill twisted his mouth to the side; Steve always thought he made these real cute faces. "S'that, like, gonna be our thing now or whatever?" he muttered. "Like I always lose my necklace and you always get it back for me or some shit?"

Steve kind of liked that. Okay not the part about Bill losing it but he liked the idea of him always finding it. "I dunno. Maybe."

"S'like that John Hughes movie." Bill sounded real serious.

"Uh, what?"

"*The Breakfast Club*," Bill told him like he was dumb. "She puts her fuckin' earring in his hand." Steve stared blankly and Billy kinda smiled. It was a really great smile. "It's romantic, man."

"Oh. Right, okay." Billy was totally the best person for him; Steve'd been thinking this was like a shitty romance movie the whole time. "Wait. Am I Molly Ringwald?"

"No, I am." Bill started laughing like a weird person so Steve kissed him again. It felt really good to kiss him so they did that for a while again.

Billy's hand trailed up Steve's shirt collar and touched the side of his neck. Steve had these three horrible beauty marks there and Bill was always touching them. "Feel like I still smell like the fuckin' hospital."

"No, you're okay."

“I know I look real bad.”

“You look okay,” Steve told him. They kissed some more. Billy kept touching him everywhere with his good hand. He clutched Steve’s shirt really hard again; he was making him so hot and they weren’t even really doing anything. He moaned when Steve slid his tongue into his mouth.

Steve had missed him so bad and this was all he’d wanted. He was kind of dizzy with it. He pulled him closer and ran his hand up Billy’s leg and over into his lap. Bill was half-hard and Steve pressed his palm down into the heat of it. God.

Bill hit Steve’s bottom lip hard and pushed up against him. They were really close on the couch and their chests bumped together; that was good too.

He was still gripping Steve’s t-shirt really tight. He pulled back a ways and kind of winced like he was kind of in pain or something. Steve wondered if his arm hurt, then thought that was stupid; of course it did. “Are you – “

“Yeah, no, I just – “ Bill twisted his face up again for a second and shook his head – “sorry, I can’t – uh, I was like real sick in the hospital, I’m not really supposed to ... I don’t feel too hot right now – “

“Oh. Oh right.” Steve sat back a little too and let him go, then grabbed his arm again because he didn’t want to let him go. He was a fucking moron. Billy was really hurt and Max had said he was real sick before. Here Steve was climbing all over him and rubbing his fucking boner on him. “God, Bill, I’m sorry, I just – “

“No, I just, ‘m totally fucked up right now. S’fine.” He smoothed his hand down Steve’s shirt – he had this way of doing that real sexy-like. It still worked with his right hand. “I can do something to you if you want.”

Jesus Christ. Please. “No, that’s not, I don’t – “

“I want to.” Billy was looking at him again with his huge blue eyes;

he was making Steve feel all flustered.

“Uhhhhhhaha,” Steve said because even kind of looped up and with his arm in a sling Billy was pretty sexy. He had to remind himself that he had willpower and wasn’t a total dick. “No, that’s okay. We can, uh, we can wait til you feel better.”

“Uh. Okay.” Billy just sat there looking uncertain.

He did look totally fucked up. It was like over Christmas break when he’d taken all those Percocets, but it didn’t look like he was having as much fun now. He looked really unsure of himself too now that they weren’t kissing.

Steve didn’t like him looking like that. “Hey, so can I see your room?”

“Oh.” Billy looked surprised. “You ... want to?”

“Yeah, sure. Of course.”

“Okay.” He looked around like he was in a daze still and then stood up – that looked like it hurt too. “Think Max is gonna come back in like a minute, I don’t really wanna deal with her – “

“Yeah, she was like a total bitch to me earlier.”

“Sorry. I told her not to do that.”

“It’s okay. She’s worried about you.”

They went down the little hallway and Billy pointed out the bathroom and Max’s room – “Got her fucking shit everywhere already – ” he muttered like he was mad; Steve knew he wasn’t really mad.

His bedroom was bigger than Steve’d expected and he didn’t have that much stuff in it yet. He finally had room for a dresser. He had his workout bench and a couple of boxes; he had a big bed which was nice.

“Red sheets, match your couch,” Steve said.

Billy rolled his eyes and sat on the bed. He looked kind of embarrassed or something. "Max got all this shit for me, thinks she's hilarious." He rubbed the back of his neck and just looked at Steve as he sat down. It was dark in here but he looked weird again. "You wanna talk some more or something?"

"Uh. Not if you don't want to."

He hesitated. "What, you wanna hear about me and the kid?"

Steve did. Even so: "I mean, Max told me some stuff, Hop told me some stuff, you don't ... have to talk about it."

"I just, uh – everybody's been askin' me shit – "

"We don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want."

"Okay." Billy was looking down at their hands near each other on the bed-sheet; the red of it looked black in the dark room. He asked in a weird voice, "So do you still wanna be with me?"

"Yeah, I do," Steve told him. So much.

"Okay. I can do better."

"I just – "

"I'll tell whoever you want, I don't care anymore."

"Yeah, I mean, that's okay." He felt stupid. It felt so stupid now. "I just wanted to know you liked me or whatever, it doesn't – "

"I do like you," Billy told him; Steve said okay. They kissed some more and then Billy pulled back and looked at him. "I can suck you off if you want," he said suddenly.

Billy was so insane. He wasn't insecure or anything so Steve didn't know why he got like this. Okay well not like he usually minded. But it was like they had to have sex or Bill had to get him off every time they hung out or something. It was like he had to prove every time that Steve wanted him or something. Sometimes Steve just wanted to hang out.

Sometimes he just wanted to hook up, though, like right now. He told himself they needed to slow the hell down. “Uh, no,” he said. “No, we don’t have to do that. We can wait til you’re better.”

“I don’t care. I want to. I’ll suck you.” He had his hand on Steve’s shirt collar again.

Jesus. He almost wanted to say okay; he was really hard again. He reached up and put his hand over Billy’s. “No, that’s okay,” he said. “I mean, I mean maybe we shouldn’t do that stuff for a while anyway.”

Billy stared at him. “You don’t want to hook up anymore?”

“No, I do.” He didn’t know how to explain himself. He was all worked up and he always screwed this part up. You weren’t supposed to do the sex stuff first; he always did the sex stuff first and got everything all screwed up. Even with Nancy they’d just slept together right away and he hadn’t even gotten to take her on a real date first. “I just, I don’t want to just have sex with you. I want us to have, like, a real thing.”

“Oh. Okay.” Bill looked totally lost. “But we can still make out and shit?”

Steve laughed. “Uh, yeah.”

“Okay.” He was still just staring. “Right now?”

“Yeah, that’s what we were doing.”

“Okay. Cool.” Bill just looked at him again and then leaned in so Steve got to kiss him and touch him some more. He really liked the kissing part; it was totally cool. They made out for a while – it was totally cool – and then Bill had to get up and take more pills and go to the bathroom. He told Steve he’d got like eight infections and he had to piss like every hour. It was so fun, he said.

When he came back into the room he looked weird and small again. He just stood at the end of the bed like a little kid. “You gotta work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Okay. You wanna go home or what?”

“I can stay if you want,” Steve said; Billy didn’t answer him for a second. Steve said, “I want to stay. If that’s okay.”

“Okay,” Billy said. He climbed over Steve on the bed and sat up; it took him a while to get his shirt unbuttoned again so Steve helped him. He swallowed hard when Steve ran a hand over his collarbones and the bandage on the left side. “Looks real ugly.”

“You’re gonna have a really sexy scar,” Steve told him; he felt strongly about it. “I can’t believe you got hurt so bad.”

“Wasn’t that deep or anything, I’d be dead,” Billy said; Steve didn’t want to think about that. He must have looked some way because Billy put his good hand on his face and kissed him again. “M’okay.”

“Yeah, I know.” They kissed for a while and Steve helped him get the rest of the shirt unbuttoned. His whole chest and stomach looked like a fucking horror movie; Steve actually couldn’t breathe for a moment. He was all black-and-blue and yellow, fading bruises. “Jesus *Christ*. ”

“Yeah.” Bill sounded uncomfortable. He shifted away a little. “Looks worse than it is.”

Steve trailed a hand down his chest. He had these – god, they looked like fucking *burn marks* or something. These little blue-black circles, red in some parts. He didn’t understand – did *El* do that? “What the – what the fuck *happened* to you?” He touched one of the circles.

Billy squirmed away some more. “Tased me and shit.”

“Jesus,” Steve said. He couldn’t talk.

“Was like *Knight Rider* or some shit.”

Steve stared at him; he couldn’t believe Bill was making fucking jokes right now. He felt totally crazy and dizzy. He grabbed both of Billy’s arms again. “Are you *okay*? ”

“Yeah, I’m great.” Billy was staring at him again; he looked like – God, Steve didn’t know. “Just c’mere,” he said so Steve leaned up and kissed him again.

Bill opened up his mouth to him. It felt totally different than it ever had before – *he* was totally different. Steve could feel this crazy intense *hurt* clinging to Billy and he wanted it to go away. He just wanted him. It made him feel totally nuts. He kissed Billy and he kissed his mouth and he kissed his face; he held Bill’s head in his hands and kissed him. His fingers tangled in the new short hair. “I thought you were fucking dead,” he babbled out. “I thought you were – I thought –”

“Nah, I’m right here.”

Jesus. He was right here. Steve kissed him again; he worked his way down Bill’s jaw and over his neck. Just wanted to touch all of him. He always wanted to touch all of him and it was weird to think about. Mostly Billy just did stuff to him and he totally took over and it was like Steve was just along for the ride or whatever. He heard Hop saying *He just got taken along for the ride* and felt too crazy. He pushed Billy down onto the bed and kissed him.

Billy let him kiss him; he stretched out on the bed and put his hand in Steve’s hair. “I fuckin’ love your shirt, man,” he said which was weird; Steve guessed that even during a hot make-out session Bill had to tease him. He kissed Bill again to shut him up and then trailed down his neck again.

He smoothed down Bill’s shirt collar – it was this red button-down shirt and Steve was vaguely sure it’d been the same one Bill’d been wearing over a year ago when he’d punched the shit out of him at Will’s house. *I’ve been waiting to meet this **King Steve** everyone’s been telling me so much about.* That was so funny now; no one really knew him aside from Bill.

The stupid punching thing didn’t really matter. Steve guessed they’d both hit each other now. He’d forgiven Bill a long time ago; he guessed now he had to make up for what he’d done.

He bit down Billy’s collarbone and spent a while kissing the hollow of

his throat. He could feel Bill's heart beating against his lips. He didn't really want to touch the bandage or anything so he left that alone and moved over to the right side again.

Bill was kind of fuzzy right now – Steve was into it. Billy always shaved his chest and he shaved *other things* too and it was probably about the hottest thing Steve'd ever seen. He guessed that Billy couldn't really do that right now. He didn't know which way he liked better; he liked them both. He kissed his way down Billy's chest, drew one hot nipple into his mouth – “*Fuck,*” said Billy so Steve kept on doing what he was doing.

Billy always looked good to him but he looked pretty bad right now, if you wanted the truth. He looked like he'd gotten run over by a fuckin' train or something. Steve worked slowly down Bill's chest and stomach. He spent a while running his mouth softly over the worst of the bruises and the horrible taser-marks, counting the shuddering breaths; he didn't want it to hurt. He followed a trail of blue-and-yellow down to the line of his jeans Bill groaned again when Steve bit his belt buckle so Steve did it again.

He could fucking *feel* Billy pressing against him, against his throat since he was kinda laying on him. He definitely wasn't half-hard anymore and Steve felt his two little brain cells fly right out of his huge Big Bird nose. He fumbled desperately around with Bill's belt and felt his erection smack against the side of his jaw. Apparently Bill didn't wear underwear anymore which was new information.

Billy was saying *Steve* and he barely ever said Steve's name so Steve pushed himself back up to meet him – Bill dragged him up by the hair and crushed his mouth against Steve's own. His hand slid between them and he was working away at Steve's jeans too; Steve vaguely remembered a million years ago saying *We don't have to do anything, we can wait til you're better. I want to have a real thing with you.* That didn't really seem to matter right now because *Bill* was the real thing and he was *right here* and he was hard and Steve was hard and he wanted him, wanted him so bad.

He put his hand over Billy's. Everything was too rushed and too fast and Steve wanted to touch him. “Let me do it, I want to do it,” he muttered into Bill's mouth and Bill just groaned and slid his tongue

against him.

Somehow they got Steve's jeans off and then they were lying together on the bed pressed against each other – Steve got his hand between them and he wrapped it around the both of them; Billy groaned and Steve swallowed it up.

It was so good. To Steve it felt like when he got really drunk for the first time in a while, so good. Like when he'd gotten drunk with Bill back in November or December or something and they'd both sat together in his backyard by the pool and had looked up at the stars; Billy'd pointed them out. Steve had been so cold but Bill had been so hot and he hadn't really know what that'd meant.

He guessed he knew now. He kissed Bill and kissed him, couldn't stop. He was so hot that it almost *hurt* ; they were both too hot and sweating and rutting against each other and some lube would be *really fucking great now* , it would be amazing, and Steve had no idea how he was going to manage not to come in the next ten seconds.

Shit. Holy crap. Fuck. He was going to have to go through his catalog of really unsexy stuff in his head because he didn't want to come yet. He wanted to make it really good for Billy right now and he wanted him to come; he loved making Billy come. He was about to pull out his mental image of Mrs. Henderson knitting in her support-hose when Bill made this strangled sound into his mouth and gripped the back of Steve's neck *hard* . Steve kinda saw stars (like back in November) and he felt Bill's cock twitch against his and then there was this hot flush and he knew Billy was coming so he came too.

It took forever which was great. Steve kind of forgot to breathe for a couple minutes. Then he tried to breathe but he was still kissing Billy so he choked a little instead. He had to pull back for a moment; he pulled Billy over on top of him and Billy went willingly.

They lay there for a while. Steve listened to Billy's heart pounding away. He felt his own heart beating as he looked up at the ceiling fan, really swanky.

He started coming back to himself slowly. They were both really sweaty and the blanket was all messed up.

Billy pressed his face into the crook of Steve's shoulder. He always did that and it was Steve's favorite place for him.

He ran his hands through Bill's hair. It'd never been this short before that Steve'd seen; it was really curly and it was gonna be so fun. He was pretty sure he had a huge stupid grin on his face.

Finally he felt like he could talk again. "I, I didn't mean to do that, that was a, a fluke. I still mean, uh."

"Mm-hmm," Billy said into his neck. He bit at one of the stupid freckles he liked so Steve tightened his arms around him.

"I missed you, Bills," he said.

"Hate that name," Billy muttered into his neck.

"Do you?" Steve asked him. He felt happy. "I don't know, I think you like it." Billy bit him again so he laughed. "Come here."

Billy shifted up. Steve ran his hands through his hair some more and cupped his jaw in both hands. They kissed again for a while but had to stop three times because Billy was smiling too much; that was really nice. Then Bill got too dizzy and had to get up. Steve felt pretty bad but Billy said it was okay.

He got up to use the bathroom again and he was gone for a while. Steve almost fell asleep and he barely even noticed when Bill'd come back in; he woke up more when Bill climbed over him.

Billy laid back down. He had to lay facing away from Steve because of his arm. They could just switch sides but Steve didn't really feel like making him get up again. He should have stayed awake and made sure he was okay. Shit. He ran a hand down Billy's back for a couple minutes.

"Feels nice," Billy said so Steve kept doing it. He was *right there*. It felt like he had to keep telling himself.

Billy felt really tense even though they'd just come on each other and all. He sounded weird, too. He was quiet for a real long time as Steve ran his hands down his back.

Steve touched his back and he touched the scars on his back; he knew where they all were even if it was kinda dark in the room. He knew what they were from. Who. Bill said, “Hey, I was coming to talk to you.”

Steve wondered how doped up he still was; he’d said that earlier. Maybe Steve’d taken advantage of him. “Yeah, I know, man.”

“I just fucked it all up again. Fucked it up for the kid.”

Oh. Eleven. “I think she was glad she had you with her.”

“Yeah, I dunno.” He was quiet again for a while; Steve kept touching his back. He couldn’t stop touching him. “I mean, she’s okay now, I guess. That’s all I really care about. And you.” He paused. “And Max, but don’t tell her.”

Steve laughed. “Okay, I won’t.”

They laid there for few minutes more; Steve kind of thought they were done talking for the night. Then Bill shifted his bad arm and made a sound. He said, “Hey man?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

Long pause. “I know I don’t deserve you or whatever.”

Steve stopped touching his back for a second; he wasn’t really sure what to say again. He made himself wake up a little more. “Bill, I don’t – I mean, I don’t really think anyone *deserves* anyone.” That sounded like some bougie crap; he waited for Bill to start teasing him.

“That’s real nice,” Billy said; for once he didn’t sound like he was making fun. “You know I like you, right?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Know I want you.”

“I, uh, I know.”

“You know, I mean I’m not,” Billy said and then stopped for a long time. Steve thought he’d fallen asleep again. He said, “You know, I’m like. In love with you or whatever.”

Steve froze with his hand on Billy’s back. He was pretty sure his eyes were about the size of dinner plates; his whole body felt frozen. “Uh, you,” he said all eloquent. “Uh, I don’t – “

“Know I don’t act like it. Sorry.”

“I,” Steve said. Oh my god. Okay. “Yeah, I – “

“You don’t gotta say it back or nothing,” Billy told him. “I just want you to know.”

Holy macaroni. Okay. He should say it back. Shouldn’t he be sure before he said it back? How was he supposed to know; he didn’t know. Two hours ago he’d been driving El home and tellin’ her he didn’t even know if he and Billy could be boyfriends again. “Uh, okay,” he said like a total moron instead of saying it back.

“That freak you out?”

“What? No.” Steve flopped down closer to him and put an arm around him. “Say it ten more times.”

Billy laughed; Steve could feel his shoulder move (he didn’t say it ten more times). “I ain’t gonna remember this shit in the morning.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Figures,” Billy muttered.

He was quiet for a long time; Steve’s mind was racing. “Are you asleep?”

“Mm,” said Billy. Steve listened to his breathing even out. He fell asleep too.

He slept fitfully but Bill was always there when he opened his eyes. One time he wasn't; Steve sat up a little and scrubbed at his face with a hand. The room was all grey which probably meant it was the morning.

He laid there for a while, listening to the sounds of the apartment. It was different than being at home. He felt this weird rumble below him, maybe someone turning on the water on the first floor.

He kind of felt like he was dreaming or like everything had been a dream, all that'd happened. Billy had said *I love you* and Steve was pretty sure he was never gonna stop thinking about it. Actually he hadn't said *I love you*. He'd said *I'm in love with you* and that was totally different. That was -- that was -- holy crap. Okay he needed to stop thinking about it because otherwise he was never gonna stop thinking about it and he'd just lay here in a daze and not go to work or anything.

After a while he got up. Somehow he was shirtless and he didn't really remember that happening; Billy had said he liked his dorky polo. He wandered back out into the hallway and went into the living room; the bright sunlight stretched in through the little sliding-glass door in the kitchen.

Max and Billy were standing together by the sizzling stove. Max was pokin' away with a spatula at something in the frying pan and bitching her head off at Bill, who was still shirtless too. "Are you even listening to me?" she went off.

"Sure am. Why you burnin' all the shit?" Billy asked her; it made Steve smile.

"I'M NOT! WHERE'S YOUR PLATE?"

"I don't have a plate."

"Oh, my g -- " Max reached across him to the counter and snagged up a plate; she turned the stove off and whirled around with it.

Her eyes got huge when she saw Steve. "Holy CRAP!" she yelled and

dropped her plate; it was a pancake. Steve backed up and almost fell onto the couch.

“Why’d you drop my pancake?” Billy asked her.

“Hey, Max,” Steve said.

“Jesus.” She fumbled about on the ground. She got her plate situated and bounced back up. Her eyes were still wide. “You could have told me he was still here!”

“Sorry. I was gonna.” Billy looked amused but he also looked weird still. In the light of the morning he still seemed small; out of place in the new apartment. He looked over at Steve. “I was gonna get you up.”

“Yeah, that’s okay.”

“Right.” Bill’s eyes slid away from him. “You want coffee or something?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Okay.”

Yep. Steve went and sat at the little table. Max was already there and she was looking at him. It made him feel weird; he was reminded he didn’t have a shirt on. Not like he was a modest girl or something – he was pretty sure Lucas had taken her to his place last summer; she’d probably been in his pool splashing him – but it was kinda different when he’d been very obviously hooking up with her brother.

Max stared between the two of them while Billy went over to the oldest coffee machine in existence (Steve wondered if it was Donna’s). She looked very calculating and Steve felt scared. “What’s going on?” she asked. “I didn’t see your car outside, I thought you went home.”

“I came back.”

“Oh.” She looked at Billy. “Do we like Steve again?”

Billy was fucking around with the oldest coffee machine and he wasn't looking at either of them. "We always like Steve," he said in a weird voice.

"Okay!" said Max. She turned her thousand-watt smile on him; Steve hadn't seen that in a while. "Do you want toast or something?"

Steve still felt scared. "Uh, sure," he said.

Max bounced up and went to the cabinet. Steve watched her and Bill move around each other. It was kinda nice, like how they'd been the two or three times when Steve'd stayed over at the house and Susan hadn't been up yet.

Billy gave him his coffee. It was in a Donald Duck mug and somehow Steve managed not to say anything. "It's pretty bad."

"I'm sure it's fine," Steve said and then almost did a spit-take. Okay it was pretty bad.

Max gave him his toast. "We got the coffee machine from our neighbor, we have to get a new one."

"It's, it's great," Steve lied. He tasted mold in between his molars.

"So, are you guys ... like ... ?" Max looked all aglow.

"I gotta get dressed," Bill said abruptly. He left the room and went down the hallway.

Max beamed at him. "Great idea, the flowers totally worked!" she told him.

"I, thanks," said Steve.

Bill came back out and tossed something at him. "Shirt."

"Oh. Thanks." Steve put his shirt back on. He watched Billy shrug back into his shirt and slowly button it up. He wasn't wearing his arm-sling but it looked like it hurt him. He wasn't wearing the bandage now and that looked real bad too. "Are you going out?"

“Gotta go to school.” Billy still wasn’t looking at him; Steve wondered if it was going to be a repeat of last night. Also:

“What, really?”

Bill shrugged. “Finals’re in like two days, I can’t miss any more time.”

“Oh. I guess you’re right.”

“Sorry. Was gonna wake you up.”

“Uh. It’s fine.” Max gave him his toast and sat down with her own.
“Are you taking Max?”

“Nope, he’s getting Lucas!” Max chirruped. Billy looked pained.
“They’re bonding.”

“Right, I heard.”

“Gonna be so great,” Billy grunted. He’d finished doing up his shirt finally and he went over by the door to pick up his backpack. He looked over at Steve and suddenly looked all weird and uncertain.
“Sorry, I gotta go – ”

“Sure,” Steve said. “That’s fine, it’s cool.”

“Okay.” Bill stared at him some more. Then he slung his book-bag over his good shoulder and stalked back across the room into the little kitchen. He stood staring down at Steve at the table looking pissed off.

“Uh, what’re you – “

Bill put a hand on Steve’s jaw and leaned down kissed him. It was a pretty nice kiss even though Steve kind of wished he hadn’t just bitten into the hugest mouthful of toast. Billy pulled away and Steve stared at him. Max stared at him too; both of her eyes were about the size of the plate she’d dropped earlier.

Billy didn’t looked pissed off anymore. He looked kind of pleased with himself. “Wanted to do that before, I didn’t. Sorry.”

“Uh,” Steve said like a playboy.

“You wanna do something later?”

“I – yeah. Definitely. Okay.”

“Okay.” Billy shifted his backpack again. “Guess I’ll call you.”

“Yeah, uhhhh,” Steve said, still like a playboy. “Call, call me tonight.”

“Okay. See ya later, I gotta go.” Then his face closed off and he reached across the table to shove Max (who was still staring) and mess up her hair. “Fucking *what*?”

“I didn’t say anything!” She let Bill mess up her hair. They watched as he stalked out of the apartment and closed the door behind him, then Max turned her gaze back to Steve. She was making the happiest, brightest goldfish face he’d ever seen.

“What?” Steve fixed his shirt collar.

“Nothing!”

“You want me to give you a ride to school?” The clock on the kitchen wall said seven-forty. He had plenty of time to take her and get himself to work.

“Sure!”

Max stared at him some more and he ate the rest of his toast as quickly as he could. He felt pretty fucking good but he also felt a little weird now with Billy gone. He’d spent so much time with Max lately but he still didn’t know how she felt about shit, not really. All the shit.

They finished eating and went out to his car. Max gave him a suspicious look as she locked up the apartment. “So how did you get Billy to talk to you?” she asked him.

Steve had to think back on the night – all he could remember was Bill’s mouth and Bill’s hair and Bill’s great dick and red sheets. It took him a minute. “Uh – El kinda threw me against a wall, I guess she

knew that'd get him to check on me.”

“Oh. Figures.” Max’s face darkened for a second and then cleared again. “If I knew all it would take was for you to get beat up, I would have *gladly* punched you in the face like four times.”

“Thanks, I know that,” Steve told her dryly; she beamed over at him.

Max fell silent as they walked down the steps and across the little front lobby of the apartment complex. The carpet out front was blue-and-gold but when you went through the main doors it was ugly green like a golf course, same as the track jacket she had on. She was quiet all the way across the street and down the block where he’d parked his car. Steve was starting to feel pretty weird again.

She usually never shut up and it made him feel awkward. She didn’t have anything to be upset about right now, he didn’t think. Maybe Bill makin’ her drop her pancake.

Steve wondered if Max was being weird because Bill had kissed him in front of her or something. She’d just seemed cool about it earlier and she’d defended them to all of the guys but maybe she – felt weird about it now that she’d actually seen them kiss or something. Now that she’d had a moment to think about it. Maybe she thought it was gross now.

That made him feel really bad. They got into the Beamer and Max still didn’t say anything. She looked up and made her almost-smiling face when she saw him looking at her. She put her seatbelt on and didn’t talk some more.

Yup. Steve put the car in reverse and edged away from the curb, then switched the Beamer into drive. “Yeah, I need better coffee,” he told her; she almost smiled again and then it fell away.

She got a weird look on her face – Steve wondered if she was going to call him a fairy like Dustin had or maybe start screaming and give him the ‘If You Hurt My Brother’ speech. He honestly felt the real true terror that Billy was always talking about. She said, “Hey Steve?”

“Yeah?” Steve said in huge fear.

She got an even weirder look on her face. She hunched down in her seat and pulled the sleeves of her track jacket over her wrists.

“Um ... I’m sorry I was kind of a dick to you before. I didn’t mean to act like that.”

Steve didn’t really understand what she meant. Last week? Two weeks ago? “That’s okay. I know you were just worried about your brother.”

“No, I – that’s not what I mean.” She made a new, sad goldfish face. “I don’t want to ... I mean, sorry I said all that stuff about you cheating on Billy and stuff. And that I yelled at you before. Sorry I didn’t let you into the apartment.”

“Oh. That’s okay.”

Max didn’t answer him for a second. “You guys always say everything’s okay,” she muttered. When he glanced over at her, her neck was turning red and he felt scared again. “I just want you to – I.” She turned even redder. “I never really had any friends before I moved here,” she said rapidly. “You know Bev only started talking to me because she was new in town, too.”

“Uh,” Steve said again. “Well, I’m your friend.”

“*I know.*” She was playing with her jacket sleeve. “But I just – I never really had any friends, I mean before I met Lucas and the guys. I don’t even know why Lucas puts up with me. I just yell at him all the time. I’m not, I know I’m not *pretty* like other girls and everything.”

Steve stared at her. He thought again that he’d never understand a single girl. She made him feel horrible in two seconds. “Hey, what are you talking about? Sure you’re pretty.”

“*Whatever.*” She put her feet up on his dashboard; her sneakers squeaked. “I just mean I – I never had any friends before. Back in California, my mom and I moved all the time, everyone was totally stupid. We never – had any money. My clothes were stupid and people made fun of me. I never really had any friends.” She chewed

on her lip. "Then my mom met Neil, and I had Billy."

"Uh, I don't – "

"He *wasn't* like when we first moved here!" Max told him. "I mean, he was – he was always kind of a jerk, but he wasn't that bad. He used to hang out with me a lot. He took me places. *Not* just when we were with his girlfriend. He took me to the skating rink! We used to go camping in our backyard when his dad was too drunk."

This was kind of a lot of information. He didn't know what to do with it all. "Okay," Steve said. "I know you guys were friends before."

"We're not *friends*, he's my *family*," Max told him exaggeratedly. "He's my *brother*. And he was so – mad at me when we moved here. So I *have* to take his side. I'm sorry I was treating you like crap. I just wanted you to know that. I don't want you guys to fight."

"Well, we're not fighting now," Steve reassured her. "It's only like, like eight o'clock, though."

Max smiled at him so he felt okay. She said, "I know he's totally stupid. He's going to screw up, like, a *lot*, you have to give him like a million chances! He *really* likes you!"

You know I'm in love with you or whatever . Steve felt dizzy; he parked in front of the diner so he could get his coffee. "Yeah, I like him too."

"Okay." She was staring at him. "So you're not mad at me?"

"Nope. Do you want a coffee?"

Max thought about it. "Hot chocolate," she said decisively.

"Okay, good choice."

Steve got his coffee and he got Max her hot chocolate. He got Linda a fancy coffee too since he guessed technically she'd gotten him back in it with Billy.

He drove himself and Max to his house real quick so that he could run in and change, then Max said she wanted to come in too so she

could see Luke and Leia.

Steve's mom's car was in the driveway so it was going to potentially be a disaster but he didn't care about that; his head was still spinning. He let Max come on inside with him.

Mom was in the kitchen with Luke and Leia and she looked up when Steve walked in. It was like eight AM and she didn't even work on Mondays but she looked all perfect like usual. "Steven, where on earth are you coming from, I waited up until three – oh." She stopped when she saw Max and she got her pretty-people smile on her face. "Maxine. Hello."

"Hi Mrs. Harrington!" Max had her pretty-people smile on too; Steve knew hers was real though. "Steve stayed at our place, did he tell you Billy got a new apartment?"

Mom was making a funny face over her own coffee. "He might have mentioned something."

"He's got a spare bedroom," Steve put in.

"Does he," said Mom in a weird tone. She had a lot of 'em; Steve didn't know this one.

"Steve was helping us move stuff." Max was letting Luke sniff her scuffy sneakers. "He was over really late. Helping!"

"I did raise you to be conscientious."

Steve ignored Mom's big look. "I gotta get ready for work."

He went off to his room and left Max to ruin his life. He changed his clothes and grabbed his sunglasses and his same tie from Friday; he had no time and he actually didn't really want Max to ruin his life.

They said bye to his mom and Steve drove Max the rest of the way to the high school. She was a little late but she said it didn't matter. They were just reviewing for finals.

Steve said bye to her too and drove to work thinking about Billy – Max and Billy, but mostly Billy. He could still taste Bill's mouth from

when he'd kissed him earlier. 'You Make My Dreams' by Hall and Oates came on the radio so Steve turned it up.

He wasn't late to the office but he wasn't early for a Monday like he usually was. He went on in and hoped that no one would call him out for looking like a huge slob. He gave Linda her coffee and she called him out immediately; she almost dropped about fifty pounds of paperwork on the floor. "Steven! That is *not* a Monday tie, what happened to you last night?"

She thought she was so crafty. Steve flipped his sunglasses onto his face like a huge dork. "I really can't discuss that during office hours, Linda," he said.

Linda laughed.

6. Chapter Six

Notes for the Chapter:

Pure fluff, like cotton candy. 99% fat free, take as much as you want.

Chapter Six

“It’s not, yeah, I’m not saying it’s bad exactly, it just tastes like something frickin’ crawled into the percolator and died,” Steve was saying.

It was Tuesday morning and Steve had stayed over again. Everyone was in the kitchen. Maxine was standing over by the counter, peering down into their twenty-year-old coffee maker with a contemplative gaze. She was wearing Billy’s blue *Rock in Rio* t-shirt and about the shortest jean shorts he’d ever seen in his life; so far Billy’d managed not to make a comment.

She tapped at the empty coffee filter and shook some grinds into it. She checked the water level like a weird person. “Yeah, but I’ve cleaned it out like three times.”

“Maybe, uh, try a fourth time.”

Max looked over at Steve at the table. She had a little frown on her face that was about to turn into a glare. “You didn’t say it sucked yesterday!”

“Yeah, but – yesterday Bill gave me the coffee,” Steve told her.

“So what?”

“He’s, you know, he’s sensitive, I didn’t wanna hurt his feelings.”

“Thanks, means a lot,” said Billy. He was at the counter, too, over by the stove. He was making eggs. Steve smiled at him so he said, “You want bacon?”

“Sure.”

“I *said* I wanted scrambled!” Max yapped her head off. She was so fucking loud at seven-fifteen in the morning, Billy thought. It was one of her gifts.

“Jesus, I know what you fuckin’ said, this ain’t for you.”

Max shuffled forward in her shorty-shorts to take a coffee mug from the cabinet and to glare at him. “I can’t believe Steve’s been here like *two days* and he already gets breakfast privileges – ”

“What do you think I had to do to get them?” Steve asked all serious like an asshole.

Max pulled a face. “Oh, my god, that’s so gross.”

“You ain’t do shit,” Billy reminded him; Steve laughed. Billy told Max, “This isn’t his fried egg, it’s *mine* . I’m gettin’ to you guys.”

“Oh, I can just do scrambled if that’s what she wants.” Steve half-stood from the table. “Do you want me to mix ‘em?”

“No!” said Max and Billy right away, maybe too loud. They’d both had Steve’s crazy cooking. Billy would say he didn’t know how you could fuck up breakfast food but he’d been living with Susan for five years so he already knew it was possible.

Usually Steve was pretty okay at making stuff but he got too creative in the morning. Billy shuddered thinking about the omelet he’d had to eat back in May at Harrington’s place. He’d ate the whole fuckin’ thing and hadn’t even pretended to choke (okay, just the one time). He didn’t understand how Harrington said he was never nice to him. There’d been fucking vegetables in that thing.

Steve looked a little insulted; Billy hadn’t even said anything. Maybe he was rememberin’ the omelet too. “Okay, okay, all right.” He sat back at the table. He was wearing another one of Billy’s shirts, too – the PARENTAL ADVISORY one – and his hair was super crazy. “You don’t have to scream about it.”

Steve had stayed over last night too and now they were all having

breakfast together. Max'd rented *Dawn of the Dead* and they'd all watched that together even though Billy had cable at the place now. Billy had been tired from bein' back at school and all so it'd been a good night. He liked to be with Steve and with Max. Max said that next they had to start Steve on the Italian slashers that she and Billy both liked; she'd cackled delightedly at Steve's face.

Billy ate his fried egg and started on the scrambled as Max and Harrington kept on discussing the horrible coffee machine. Steve said it was probably the brand of coffee that she was using too and Max looked all offended. There'd been a sale at the general store last week.

"What's wrong with Chock full o'Nuts?" Max sounded even more offended.

"I mean, how many nuts do you usually take in the morning?"

"Usually like two to start," Billy put in; Max groaned.

"We always drink that at home."

"Sorry, it sucks there too, kid," Billy told her.

Max sat at the table in a big sulk and grabbed up her fork like a demon. She banged it on the table. "You should have told me before I bought a huge tin!"

"Quit slammin' shit."

"We can just get more," Steve said. "We should just get you a new coffee machine."

Billy gave him his eggs. "I ain't got money for that."

Steve took the plate and stared at him in a weird way. He'd been looking at him weird all morning and Billy didn't really know why. Wasn't like he hadn't ever seen Billy cook breakfast before. "Do you need money?"

Billy gave him the bacon. "No, I don't need money."

“I just mean for like rent and stuff.”

Christ. “I got rent money,” Billy told him. “I just don’t got any other money. Missed work for like two weeks.”

Steve looked even weirder. “Yeah, I know that.”

“ *AHEM*, ” Maxine said like a troll; Billy rolled his eyes and gave her her eggs too. Jesus. “We can at least get a new coffee machine!”

“Why you always gotta say *we*? ” He took her toast.

“I can get you guys something,” Steve said.

“That’s okay, man,” Billy said because Max looked way too eager in two seconds. Harrington could kiss that American Express goodbye if Maxine got wind of it. “You don’t gotta do that. I’m serious.”

“Sure, okay, I know,” Steve said unconvincingly. Billy gave him a look which was pointedly ignored.

Billy sat down too and everyone ate their food. Max was yapping on and on about school and the coffee machine and where they could get a new one and how she was maybe going to fail science for the year. Steve kept kinda leaning on Billy at the table and he kept saying his real stupid shit on purpose to piss Maxine off.

“It’d be real cute if you guys were in summer class together, you’d like rule the school.”

Max gave him a scathing look; they already ruled the school.

“I ain’t goin’ to summer school, I gotta get a C on my math final to pass,” Billy told him. “Hank’s gonna make me work up front half the summer.”

“Jesus, can you do that? Work up front, I mean.”

“Dunno.”

It wasn’t hard to be there with them both and to just be with Steve like Billy’d thought it might be. Well it was just Max but he guessed

he'd thought he would feel like a freak or something, like he might feel ashamed. That it would be weird or hard. It wasn't hard. It was so easy.

They started talking about hockey even though Max begged them not to talk about hockey. Billy had missed the game on Friday night; there was another one coming up. He'd fucking known the Flyers were going to go for the cup.

Steve was real close to him. He looked real good wearin' Billy's t-shirt or whatever. Actually the whole kitchen looked good and Billy felt okay in there. It wasn't too messy yet or anything; the sliding-glass door that led out to the fire escape made the room look awash with light. The morning was pretty nice here despite Maxine fuckin' talking even more than she did at home. She'd gotten some fancy vase for the flowers that Steve had got him the other night – Billy didn't know where she'd found the thing – and they were set up on the windowsill now too, alongside her dumb ferns.

It made Billy feel weird as fuck looking at 'em but he guessed they looked pretty nice or whatever. Smelled nice too. He still couldn't believe Harrington had really done that shit. Fucking flowers. He didn't even know how the fuck Steve had known or figured out that he liked lilies. Well not that he *liked* them but they made him think of his mom, he guessed. He didn't think he'd ever said that though.

He reached out and touched the inner part of Harrington's arm; he had two freckles there above his elbow. Steve stopped eating and stared at him. His hair looked like the Flock of Seagulls guy right now. "I won the hockey pool at my work, I can take you to dinner this weekend," he said.

"Okay," Billy said.

Steve ate his breakfast; he started eating Billy's too when he saw Billy wasn't eating. Billy pushed his plate over and Steve ate his toast and stared at him some more as Max ran off to wash her face and get all her crap ready for the day. He kept on giving Billy this big weird look whenever they weren't talkin'.

Billy guessed Steve had been giving him the big weird look last night

too. He didn't really understand it. He'd thought he'd known all of Harrington's expressions but this was a new one. He didn't know if he was supposed to say more shit to him or something.

It'd been an okay night even though they hadn't even really done anything sexy. PG-13 at most. Maybe TV-14. That was a new rating on the TV. They'd made out for forever once they'd gone to Billy's room and then talked some more. Steve had seemed to want Billy to talk so he'd talked. He'd told him about being stuck in that place for days, how he'd felt when they'd hit his car. That guy who had tased him and that guy who had brought him food. Jane being in his head all the fucking time. He told Steve that once he'd known he couldn't get out he'd just started thinking about the dumbest shit. The people he knew. Steve and Tracey and his mom and Max as a kid. Jane had seen all of that.

Steve had been pretty freaked out about it all and Billy didn't really blame him. He couldn't bring himself to think about it that much. He didn't really want to think about all of it. He was just talkin'. He couldn't talk about all of it, couldn't think of what to say. That little girl. Billy couldn't do anything; Harrington didn't need to know about it.

I can't believe you're just – you're just fine. Aren't you upset?

Sure I'm upset. You want me to cry?

Uh, no, I can't handle that, Steve had said right away. Billy'd almost laughed. *But, I mean – those guys. I would be, I would be, like, in a mental institution, you're just laying here with me.*

What, they're dead, Billy'd said; Steve had stared at him. *I don't care about them, I don't care what they did to me. I don't know 'em.*

Yeah, but you were ...

If it was somebody I knew I'd care about it. If it was you doin' it to me I'd care about it.

*Uh, okay, Bill, I would NEVER do **ANYTHING** like that to you!* Steve'd said all impassioned in two seconds.

Thanks, I know that, Billy had told him. Kid killed them, I wanted 'em to die .

Yeah, but that – that doesn't freak you out? How powerful she is or whatever?

Billy hadn't answered for a couple minutes. He remembered how he had felt all of Jane's powers, locked up in her head like a live-wire about to crack open. He'd laid there and looked at Steve, laying next to him on his bed. Steve on his bed was real great. *I guess. She can do anything. She's real strong. Probably more'n you think.*

Uh, okay. What does that – how strong?

Billy thought about it. *Could level the whole state real easy, he said. Probably Michigan too.*

Jesus Christ.

Pretty awesome, right?

Steve made one of his real sarcastic laughs. *Uh, I don't know.*

Yeah, so you better be nice to me, Billy'd said. Steve stared at him with wide eyes and it made him laugh. *I'm JOKING!* He'd pulled Steve on top of him; Steve let him do it. *Are you gonna be nice to me?*

Hm, I don't know , Steve'd said. He'd put a hand in Billy's hair. He'd been pretty nice; Billy thought he could have been a little nicer.

He guessed that Harrington was actually being serious about the no-sex thing or whatever he'd said before. Really Billy kinda thought it sucked waiting for it but he'd wait for it if that's what Steve wanted to do. He'd wanted Harrington for a real long time and he'd thought that he'd fucked everything up so he could wait a little while longer. Anyway Steve'd said *I don't just want to have sex with you, I want us to have like a real thing* so Billy guessed it was okay they hadn't hooked up like crazy or whatever.

He could do the real thing if Steve wanted. That's what he wanted too. That's what he'd *been* wanting, he guessed, even if he hadn't really wanted to say it or believe it before.

He wasn't going to screw it up again or be a fucking dick for no reason, Billy told himself. Well he'd try really hard. He wondered if he was supposed to ask Harrington on a date or somethin' to make it official. Maybe that's what Steve was waiting for.

His arm and his shoulder still kinda hurt too bad for that shit right now anyway. Well, the sex shit not the official date shit. Harrington would probably lose his fucking mind (not in a good way) if Billy pulled one of his stitches blowing him or jerking him off or somethin'. Billy could wait another week or so. Jesus. What if Harrington was gonna make him wait til like August or some shit.

It'd been real nice or whatever just falling asleep and touching him though. That was always nice even if it was like faggy or whatever. He guessed he had to get used to being a faggot.

Billy hadn't really slept in his new room alone yet – was weird because he didn't like it bein' too dark in there which wasn't a thing before. Usually he'd prefer it that way, had stayed up the whole night the couple times he'd been at Steve's place and they'd left the TV on. Now the dark of the room seemed to swallow him up, like it was drowning him. It made him think of being stuck in a box or something, or back in that basement, trying to get out. The streetlight outside of his window didn't help anything.

Anyway Steve hadn't said anything about the lamp by his bed staying on. Billy had woken up two or three times and each time Steve had been awake and staring at him like a little nut; he'd closed his eyes again when Billy'd put his good arm over him.

When he'd gotten up before seven Steve had finally been conked out. Billy was going to have to get another blanket because Harrington fucking hogged the comforter and got it all twisted up.

He'd watched Steve all flopped out on the bed for a couple minutes. He'd gotten dressed, looked at himself in the mirror as he'd done his shirt up. His face still looked pretty screwed up and he had a bunch of marks and bruises all down his back and his chest. Steve had kissed them all two nights in a row; Billy had no clue how Steve still wanted to be with him. He kind of felt like a brand-new person or whatever. It really meant something.

He'd sat back down on the bed and touched the back of Steve's neck until he'd woken up. He couldn't believe he could just touch him whenever he wanted.

"Hm?" Steve had said. His face was in the pillow.

"Yo, it's the mornin'."

"Hm?" Steve said.

"Do you want food?"

"Hm?" Steve said.

"Food," Billy said again. "You want it?" He didn't know how to do the cute morning shit. He finally moved his hand away.

"Oh. Yeah. Okay." Steve had flopped over and scrubbed at his face with both hands. He wasn't wearing a shirt; Billy lamented his life lookin' at Harrington's cute little nipples. "Can I shower here?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"I have to go home again and – " he'd yawned like a sexy animal – "get changed before work."

"Should just bring stuff here."

"Oh. Yeah, I can do that." He'd started up with his weird staring thing.

So that'd happened and then Billy'd made breakfast and then they were eating and then they were done eating. Max came out of her room with her backpack and asked Steve if he'd give her another ride. Steve said sure.

Max put their dishes in the sink; she said they should force El to finally do some when she came over later and Billy agreed.

They filed out of the apartment together. Harrington's Beamer was a couple cars down from Billy's on the side-street; he looked over at the Camaro with a little frown on his face.

Hank had fixed Billy's windshield while he'd been in the hospital but the back of the car was still all crushed up and one front headlight was fucked. The driver's-side door was scraped up and the side-paneling had come off; Billy didn't remember that happening but it must've been when he'd hit the guardrail. "Hey, what're you gonna do about your car?"

Billy shrugged. "Still gotta get to school. I can just leave it at the shop after next week. Fix it up over the summer or whatever."

"I mean, I could drive you around if you want." Steve offered. He smiled. "Or you could drive me around, whatever."

Billy chewed on his lip. "Yeah, we'll see."

Max was tugging on Steve's shirt like a little kid; Steve ignored her. He was still looking at Billy with his pretty-boy hair falling into his eyes. He made his squinty face even though the sun wasn't in his eyes. "I could – uh, d'you want a ride now?"

"Nah. I gotta get the kid again." Picking up Lucas was about the only goddamn reason Billy was getting near his car right now. *Looks real ugly*, he'd said yesterday.

What, your face? Sinclair'd said real sweet; Billy had laughed. *Hey, the car looks cooler this way.* He was a piece of work.

Max yanked Steve's shirt again. "Steve! If I'm late again they'll lock me out of homeroom!"

"I didn't realize that was my problem," Steve told her. He looked over at Billy. "Uh, okay. You all right?"

"Sure."

"Okay." Steve had the weird stare on his face again. It made Billy feel like he was doing something wrong – like there was a cue or something he'd missed. "Yeah, well, I – okay. See ya."

"Yeah, see ya," Billy said too. He wondered what he was supposed to be doing. They couldn't really kiss on the street or whatever; there was a little old lady across the street walkin' her dog over to the park

and he didn't want to make her have a heart attack. He stood there looking at Max and Steve. "Be careful," he said.

Max looked at him like he was an insane person and Steve got an even weirder look on his face. "Sure, we will," he said.

Billy watched them get into the Beamer. He got into his car too.

Sinclair was waiting out for him on his porch and reading a comic like a little nerd; he jumped up and dashed across the lawn when he saw Billy's car coming.

"Hey," he said, climbing in.

"Hey, what you got for me?"

Lucas dug around in his backpack and handed over today's horrible music. It was another Run-DMC tape, *Raising Hell*. "It's their newer one, you'll like it," he said.

"Yeah, we'll see." That 'It's Tricky' song was okay, he guessed, had come out back in February or somethin'. Billy put the tape in and took them to school. Neither of them really talked too much but he guessed that was okay. Actually maybe that was real good for them. "You seen Byers around?" he asked as they pulled into the parking lot.

Lucas got one of his captain shitheel looks on his face; his eyes slid to the side. Christ he was almost as bad as Maxine or Mike. Wheeler Jr, Billy reminded himself. "Who, Jonathan?"

The little assholes all thought they were so fucking funny. "No, not *Jonathan*, you little shit."

Lucas laughed and laughed. Then he stopped laughing. "Sure I've seen Will."

“He’s avoidin’ me.”

Sinclair got a weird little look on his weird little face. “He is?” he said like a dum-dum.

“Yeah, why’s he avoiding me?”

“Okay, you – really don’t know about it?” Sinclair said.

Billy braked too hard and parked in the front of the lot. “Know what?”

Sinclair got an even weirder look. “Nothing!” he said. He unbuckled his seatbelt. “He’s ... really busy. With work.”

Was like the second or third time someone’d said that to him about the kid. Billy thought that was a load of bullshit but he wasn’t about to have yet another big gay talk with Sinclair about yet another guy. “Okay,” he said.

“Yeah, you know how it is.”

“Sure do.”

“Everybody’s working for the weekend.”

“Mm-mm. Don’t say that,” Billy advised.

“Makin’ that green,” Sinclair went on happily; he was such a fucking dork.

“Man, shut the fuck up,” Billy begged him; Sinclair laughed and opened up his car door.

Sinclair said later and that he’d see Billy after school; Billy said okay again. He felt like a sulky bitch as he got out of his car. He’d kind of thought that he and Byers were friends or some shit. It was whatever and it was fucking lame to be friends with a fifteen-year-old but he’d thought they were friends.

Will was the only one of the creepy kids who hadn’t come and seen him yet. Billy’d thought maybe he’d come over or something. Even

Wheeler Jr had come over. Mostly to see Jane and all but still. He had a bunch of ugly shit at his place from Henderson and yesterday Dustin'd been on him like glue in study hall as per usual but he hadn't heard shit from Byers.

He just hadn't thought the kid would be an asshole about it or whatever. Max and Steve'd told him all the kids knew he was a great big faggot now; so far no one had really said anything about it aside from fuckin' Henderson yesterday blabbering about how happy he was that Billy'd reunited with Harrington until Billy'd squeezed his face and told him to shut the fuck up. He didn't even know how the fuck Henderson knew about it already.

Billy knew he made shitty jokes in his head and stuff but he didn't actually say them *out loud* . He knew Byers wasn't really queer or whatever. Just hadn't thought he'd have a big fucking problem with it. He guessed his free movie nights were over.

Whatever. He didn't even really care about it, Billy reminded himself. He got out of the car too and went across the parking lot.

School sucked ass like it always did. Yesterday no one'd been able to leave him alone and he'd had to tell his fucking made-up story about eighty times to a bunch of assholes who'd never really cared to talk to him before. Today he had to tell it about twenty more times.

None of his teachers really bothered him that much though. Coach hadn't even screamed at him for missing their last basketball game and yesterday he'd said 'Glad you're back.' His English teacher had told him that too. She said that he could still hand in his research paper; he'd missed turnin' it in last week. Maybe the week before. She'd grade it with his final and wouldn't dock him. She'd been real nice and all.

He guessed Susan had called the school for him and told 'em what happened. Well, what she'd thought had happened, at least. It made him feel fucking weird thinking about her doing that shit for him. She didn't have to do that – she wasn't his mom and he didn't even live with her anymore. It made him feel real shitty, thinking about her sitting down and calling the school for him. So he stopped thinking about it.

Math class was the worst like usual; Billy had not been looking forward to going back to that. They'd learned a whole new crop of shit in the two weeks he'd been out and he was totally lost. Was no way he was gonna catch up in like five days to take the final on Monday.

It sucked major tits because he'd really been doing kind of okay until now. He probably wouldn't really fail and have to take the summer class (*again* , he reminded himself) but he'd thought maybe he might actually get a B for the year or something. Be kind of cool or whatever to know he could do that, even if it was just retard math and even if it didn't matter.

Billy leaned back in his chair and felt his eyes glaze over as the teacher talked on and on. He couldn't really help not payin' attention; it was math class, after all.

He started daydreaming about Steve like he usually did — he wanted to see him again. Probably call him tonight and they could do something. Or maybe three days in a row was too much. They hadn't really talked about their huge thing on Sunday but Billy was pretty sure he'd said *I love you* . He'd been kind of fucked up but he was like 90% sure he'd said it. Maybe you shouldn't say that shit and then want your guy to stay over for three nights. Harrington was gonna think Billy wanted him to move in or some shit.

The ground started moving underneath him and the teacher stopped talking. For a second Billy kinda thought he was havin' a panic attack or something; he totally froze. He counted to ten in his head but it was still happening. It kinda felt like when he got the falling feeling.

Two erasers fell off the chalkboard and some chick screamed. Billy watched his pencil wobble off his desk and onto the floor.

It went on for a couple more seconds and then it stopped. Everybody started talking all at once and a buncha girls started yelling and freaking. Mr. Morris was droppin' his erasers everywhere trying to comfort them.

Billy guessed it'd been an earthquake and he felt kinda stupid. They happened sometimes in California; back when he'd been eight or nine

they'd had one that'd been pretty bad and the power'd been out for like four days. He'd thought that shit wasn't really supposed to happen out here in the Midwest though. It was too fuckin' weird.

All the shenanigans put a stop to their math review so there was that. When the bell rang the teacher handed out their final worksheets and told them all good luck. He held Billy back after class to ask him if he thought he could learn the material and Billy said he could still pass for the year.

By the time Morris let him go it was late; he didn't need a pass though since he just had study hall. Billy jammed his papers into his backpack and wandered off down the hall. Will still wasn't at his locker and Billy felt like a sulky bitch once more.

Henderson wasn't in study hall and Billy kinda got a kick thinkin' of him passed out somewhere or freakin' out because of the earthquake. He sat at his normal table and was about to take a nice nap to recover from Algebra when Angela Davis wandered over holding her books and sat down next to him.

"Hey Angie," Billy said. He still had to be nice to her even if it was the end of the year and all; she'd been his only weed connection since he'd beat up Tommy Hall the first time. He guessed he could rely on Max's friend Bev but Angela was okay he guessed. Felt like he hadn't seen her in about fifty fuckin' years.

"Hey, I'm glad you're back!" she said. She actually looked happy to see him; it was too weird. She looked at his fucked up face and his fucked up arm. "Are you all right?"

"Sure am," Billy said. He waited for her to get into it.

She didn't ask him what'd happened to him though and he felt grateful. Probably she'd heard the story from one of her girlfriends already. "Did you feel that earthquake last period? Freaky."

"Slept through it."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Okay. Well, that doesn't happen here, a couple kids went home. I see your little lackey's missing."

Billy took a couple seconds to feel offended at Henderson being called his lackey; maybe Angie was pretty terrible after all. "Wasn't that bad, don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried," she told him primly and sniffed. "You know, my stepdad always said that Hell would freeze over if I actually graduated on time, maybe that's starting."

"Your stepdad friends with my old man?" Billy asked her; she laughed.

"What are you going to do about finals? You missed so much time. Are they going to let you take them?"

"Guess so. Probably fail and get D's for the year."

"We finished *Macbeth* while you were out."

Billy'd read that before. "I ain't really that worried about English, I'm gonna fucking fail my math class."

"Who do you have?" Angela asked so Billy told her.

"Retard math," he said at her blank look.

"Oh. No, that's not that bad," she lied. She played around with her textbook. "You know, I tutor one of the sophomores that's in that class. He pays me five bucks a week."

He didn't really know what she was getting at. "Okay."

"I could give you the worksheets I made up for him. If you wanna stop over today. I can give you my English crap too."

"I ain't got five bucks for you."

She rolled her eyes. "You're an asshole," she told him. "You know, I got an A on that essay you helped me with. I can help you with math, I thought we were friends."

Billy didn't know about all that. He'd even missed her fuckin' birthday party, whenever that was. He wondered if she knew that

about half the school thought they were hookin' up or had hooked up. "You don't mind doing that?"

"Nope. I'm just babysitting today, they won't bother us though."

He guessed he didn't really have anything to do today anyway. "Okay," he said.

Billy drove Sinclair home after school and then he drove himself over to Angela Davis's house. He already knew where she lived because she kinda lived near Harrington. Her house wasn't quite as big or fancy though and it was kinda messy inside.

He was hopin' that she wasn't gonna try to put the moves on him or something but she really did have a fucking pack of horrible brothers and sisters like she'd said. She screamed her fuckin' head off at them and then locked three of 'em in the basement. To be honest, Billy was kinda impressed by her.

"They've got a TV down there, don't worry," she told him. "Those three I'm not related to, Malcolm's my only full-blood brother. Jacob's the demon watching *Scooby-Doo* on the couch, he's my mom's little kid with Sean. He's okay. Sorry they're so loud."

Billy wasn't gonna remember any of those names. "That's okay," he said.

It took a couple of hours for her to go over the math stuff with him, then she gave him her English notes too. *Macbeth* was easy shit; Billy was kinda sad he'd missed O'Hearn's dramatic reading of Lady Macbeth losing her shit. Apparently it'd been real good.

It was past seven when he finally got out and went back to the apartment. The street was pretty full so he parked his fucked-up car in the alleyway and went on up.

He was tired from class and tired from listenin' to Angie scream at her kid brothers. His shoulder kinda hurt and he felt sick-dizzy. He should have worn that stupid sling to school that they'd given him but that'd make people bug him even more. He wasn't supposed to

move his arm too much; he could pull his stitches out.

When he went into the apartment Elijane was in the kitchen eating a waffle by the sink like a little savage. She was wearing yet another one of her provocative outfits – high-waisted jeans like a pair Billy was pretty sure he'd seen one of his mom's aunts wear once in maybe '74 and a huge grey t-shirt that said HAWKINS PD on it. Steve was there too which Billy hadn't been expecting. He still had his work clothes on. He and Max were sittin' on the couch looking at her science book and everyone looked up and stared when Billy came in.

Billy closed the door and shifted his backpack on his good shoulder. They were making him feel weird as shit. "Hey," he said.

Max's face turned redder than a tomato and she snapped her book shut, nearly on Steve's hand. She threw it down and stalked off to her room. The door slammed all dramatic.

Billy stared blankly after her. Steve said, "Uh, you okay?"

"Sure," Billy said shortly. "What you doing here?"

Steve's brows went down and he got the big frown-wrinkle between his eyes. "I wasn't gonna – stay or whatever."

Billy realized he was being a grade-A piece of shit in two seconds; he couldn't stop his fucking mouth. "That's not what I meant," he said. "Come over whenever you want. I mean, why's she, ah – " he waved his hand over at the hallway – "why's she slammin' shit?"

Steve still had the wrinkle-frown. "Uh, are you serious?"

"What?"

"Gee, I don't know, Bill – " he kind of laughed – "she, you know, she called me up, she said she came home at five and El was here by herself – "

Billy dropped his book-bag on the floor and looked over at the kid. She was pouring herself a drink now, lookin' past the fridge over at the fire escape. He remembered her saying *Tuesday at four* about a million years ago and felt like a total fucking dickface. It hadn't really

been a million years ago; it'd been two days.

"Shit," he said. "I'm sorry, kid."

"I was okay," El said placidly.

He turned back to Steve. "So why's she mad at me?"

Harrington looked kind of disbelieving. "Uh, you," he said. "Man, you were just ... missing for a whole week, I think she was pretty freaked out."

Oh right. "Oh right," Billy said.

"Yeah, she, she called me all upset, she wanted to like call her mom and shit. I just came over to calm her down."

Billy went over and sat on the couch; Steve stared at him. "What, you pissed at me too?"

"No, I'm not pissed at you. Just, uh, give her a break."

"I was just studyin'," Billy said like a sulky bitch.

Steve nudged his shoulder. "I didn't think you knew how to do that."

"I *don't*," Billy said. He told Steve about bein' at Angela Davis's house and then thought maybe he shouldn't do that. Steve got a weird look on his face and then he kind of smiled.

"Okay, did she ask you to Prom?"

"Man, shut the fuck up," Billy said right away.

"You know she wants to. You still have til next week." He was teasing him. "Nice cover for you."

"No, it's not like that," Billy told him. He thought about it, chewed on his lip. "You remember what I told you," he said lowly.

Steve stared at him some more and got his weird look on his face again. Billy guessed that really he'd told him a lot; he felt seriously fucking stupid in about a minute. *You know I'm like in love with you.*

Shit. He'd totally said it. Wasn't like it wasn't true but shit.

"Yeah, I remember," Steve said.

Billy stared back at him. He thought maybe they were havin' a moment or something. Then Jane came over and turned the TV on like a little shit and Steve looked over at her.

He got up again and went to deal with Max. Tried the doorknob and it was locked so he had to knock all timid like he was in some emotional movie. He didn't know how to do this crap. "Hey, Max, lemme in," he said. Cold silence. He knocked again. "Maxi-pad."

"Go away!"

"I'm fine, man, don't get all upset."

"I'm NOT upset!"

"Okay," Billy said. "Sorry I made you worry."

"I WASN'T *WORRIED* ABOUT YOU! I WISH YOU WERE STILL GONE, YOU DIRTBAG!" Max went the fuck off in her hysteria through the door; Billy felt his heart swell. God she was such a little bitch.

"Come on, man. Lemme in, lemme talk to you."

"No! Go away! I have homework!" Max snitted. She was a little liar too. Her book-bag was on the damn coffee table.

Steve was real close behind him all of a sudden; he put on hand on Billy's hip and reached over him to knock on the door too. Billy leaned back against him. "Hey, Max, quit being dramatic."

"I'm NOT!"

"I thought you were, uh, I thought you wanted to go to the store or whatever."

No answer. Steve knocked again. "Hey, I thought we were going to go to K-Mart," he wheedled.

“Were we?” Billy asked him; Steve smiled real nice.

There was another long pause. “Max?” Steve said again.

“Can we still go to Denny’s?” came the muffled reply.

Steve put his head on Billy’s shoulder. “Do you wanna go to Denny’s?” he asked in Billy’s ear like a dork.

Billy had felt kind of fucked up all day but he felt okay now with Harrington right there saying his dorky shit in his ear. Anyway, he didn’t want Max pissed at him and the best way to get her to not be pissed was with food. “I guess.”

“Okay.” Steve reached over him and knocked on the door again. “Yeah, we can go to Denny’s.”

The lock clicked. “You may enter,” Maxine said dramatically.

Elijane trailed in after them. “What is Denny’s?” she asked.

Billy went and took a shower. It took him a while to get ready because he still felt like shit. He didn’t want to take any more of his pain meds; they made him feel too looped up and they made him say all this romantic shit to Harrington. He got dressed and put his stupid sling on his stupid arm, then they all went out to Harrington’s car.

The kids got into the back and Max squawked her head off tellin’ Steve about the earthquake as he drove them out of town.

“Yeah, I heard about it on the news when I got home.”

Max was leaned up into the front with her head stickin’ between the two of them; Billy pushed her face back. “You didn’t feel it at work?”

“No, I guess it was just around here.”

“Well, it’s weird. Dustin threw up!” Max said; Billy laughed.

“Yeah, I heard about that too. Not on the news.”

"Isn't it *weird*? " Max pressed.

"Yeah, it's, it's pretty weird."

"So do you think it's the gate or something?"

Steve sighed. "Man, I, I don't know. What do you think?" he asked Jane.

She was playin' around with one of Max's little colored Chapsticks in the backseat; she looked up all surprised. Billy could see the little frown she got on in the rear-view mirror. "I - don't know. I'm sorry."

"No, that, it's fine," Steve said. "I mean, it's probably fine. Right?"

"Had 'em all the time back in Riverside," Billy said.

"Not *all* the time," Max put in.

"More'n once a year."

"I guess."

Steve didn't say anything for a couple minutes. He turned the radio up, then turned it down. "Okay, so where am I going first?"

Maxine looked thoughtful; she was real serious about shopping and about spending Billy's and Steve's money. She said shopping first and then they could go to eat. If they ate first they'd probably be too tired to go around lookin' at a bunch of stuff.

"Totally right, that's good logic," Steve said. He took them out of town.

The K-Mart was out past Lawrenceville about a half-hour away. Lawrenceville was one of the bigger towns in the county, Billy guessed what kinda passed as a little city around here. Not as big as Eastgate or Indianapolis but they had a buncha big stores. The fastest way there was down Route 42 but Steve went down the freeway that was a little out of the way.

Billy didn't say anything about him not taking 42. That was where

he'd crashed his car up. He guessed Steve knew that.

Harrington was in a better mood after they stopped talking about the earthquake or whatever. He drummed his hands on the steering wheel like a little kid. "This is really exciting, I've never been in K-Mart before," he said. "What's the K stand for?"

Billy and Max exchanged a look in the rear-view mirror; of course he hadn't. Steve said, "Okay, you guys don't need to do that."

"I haven't been to K-Mart either," Elijane said. Billy guessed she wouldn't have.

"So what, what kinda store is it?"

"S'like a discount department store I guess."

"Oh!" Steve said. "Okay, like Bloomingdale's?"

Maxine looked like her head was gonna explode. "No, it's – like a Wal-Mart."

Steve looked blank. "Yeah, I haven't been there either."

Jesus God. "Woolworth's?" Max tried.

"Okay, yeah. I got some sports stuff there before."

The K-Mart was real big and in its own plaza. Max and Harrington spent eighty years pickin' out a good shopping cart at the front; Max said they always got one with a squeaky wheel. Jane's eyes were about as big as dinner plates as she looked at the huge candy display by the front doors. Was definitely a better selection than at the general store back in Hawkins.

"OOH! MOVIES!" Steve said in thrall. He sailed off with the cart towards electronics.

Elijane trailed after him with an awed expression on her little face. She looked like the smallest security guard in her Hawkins PD shirt.

Max assaulted Billy's good arm. "Come on, we need to get towels for

the apartment, we only have two.”

“There’s only two of us,” Billy said; Max just stared at him and shook her head. “I only got like ten bucks on me.”

She ignored him and walked off so Billy trailed after her too. He felt like a little kid followin’ his mom around in the five-and-dime.

Max got distracted lookin’ at girly shit; Billy lamented his life and wandered away too after a couple minutes. He looked at the books and comics and then spent a while looking at weights. He had most of his shit at the apartment now but he still had his old set down in the basement at home; they’d been a present.

He didn’t think he’d been lookin’ for too long but when Max found him she looked impatient and was holdin’ two shopping bags already. “Come on, it’s after nine, they’re closing soon.”

“What you get?” Billy asked her; she ignored him. “How’d you get shit?” She ignored him even more.

Out in the parking lot they had a cart full of crap that Steve and Jane were happily loading into the car. Jane had a new t-shirt on; it had Scooby-Doo on it. “I can’t believe you guys never took me here before, everything is so cheap,” Steve said as he opened his trunk. “I only spent like ninety bucks.”

Jesus Christ. “I hope you didn’t fucking spend your money on me, man,” Billy said.

“What? It’s mostly food.”

“We needed stuff, Billy!” Max yapped. She dug around in the cart. “Where’s my CD?” She plucked up another bag and grabbed Elijane too; they wandered around to the front of the car talking and giggling. El climbed into the backseat and sat backwards staring at them through the rear windshield.

Billy watched Harrington load stuff into the car; he felt kind of confused. “Did you buy her a t-shirt?”

“Yeah, she wanted one. She already threw me around your hallway, I

need that kid to like me.”

“She does like you.”

“Yeah, well.” He was trying to fit a huge box into the trunk. “We’ll see.”

“You didn’t have to buy all this shit.”

“It doesn’t matter, Max wanted stuff,” Steve said. “Did you know they sell candy bars in boxes of twelve?” He told Billy, “I got you a lava lamp, it’s red. Now you don’t need the light on in your room.”

Okay he guessed Steve had noticed the lamp bein’ on after all. He didn’t say anything for a while. “You didn’t have to do that,” he said again.

Steve closed up the trunk; he got the wrinkle-frown between his eyebrows. “What, are you mad?”

“No.” Billy didn’t know what he was. He wasn’t mad but he felt weird. He’d joked before that Harrington could buy him stuff. He didn’t really want to be his charity case or whatever though. “I got enough stuff.”

“It was mostly for the kids,” Steve said. “It doesn’t matter.”

Harrington could just drop a hundred bucks and not be concerned about it. Maybe it wasn’t a lot to him but it was a lot to Billy. He didn’t want Steve to think he had to buy him shit or whatever. “Okay.”

“And you needed a coffee machine, I like espresso sometimes,” Harrington went on.

“Yeah, I know that, you bougie bitch,” Billy said; Steve smiled. “I just – ”

“STEVE!” Max yelled her head off. “CAN WE GO? EL’S HUNGRY!”

“How the hell is she hungry, she just ate two candy bars.”

“That’s not real food!” She beeped the horn like a little shit.

“Uh, you better not be in my front seat – “

Denny’s was about twenty minutes away, closer to home. Max and El got kinda loud in the backseat. Billy was pretty sure they’d both had more than two candy bars; they were going totally nuts. He thought it was nice to hear the girls laughing or whatever. Then Max sang along to the Bananarama song that came on the radio and Billy thought it was less nice.

It was almost ten when they got to the restaurant and it was mostly empty. Max said that they could call Hopper from the front so he wouldn’t worry about El; the girls skipped on out of the car. Billy sat in the front seat and watched them run into the diner.

Steve touched the back of his neck, just for a couple seconds. “Hey, you alright?”

Billy thought about it. “Yeah, I’m good.”

Steve looked way too happy for someone who’d just spent a shit-ton of money on two little brats and Garbage Pail Kid Billy. “Dustin is gonna be so pissed that we went to Denny’s without him,” Steve said.

Wednesday started finals at school. Billy said he needed to study for history and for math so Harrington said he’d leave him alone for a while. That wasn’t what Billy’d meant but he didn’t need to be some clingy bitch forcing Steve to stay over with him all week or whatever.

He studied some more with Angela Davis. Her parents weren’t home again and Billy ate three popsicles and watched her scream at her little brothers some more. Must be somethin’ about this street and people’s folks never being home. Steve’s mom was okay and all but she was never around either. From the way Harrington talked about her sometimes it seemed like she hadn’t been around in a while. When he came home Max had Henderson over. They were eatin’ a

pizza and Henderson had another box of even weirder shit to give him.

Thursday night Susan stopped over again; she'd been here last weekend helpin' him get set up.

Billy let her in. She had some more stuff for him: a box of his books from down in the basement that he hadn't even known he'd had anymore, even more dishes, a little vacuum cleaner.

"Max's at work," he told her.

"I know where she is."

"She don't gotta stay here all the time if you don't want."

"That doesn't matter to me. I wanted to see how you were," Sue told him.

"I'm fine," Billy said. She didn't answer him so he said, "I'm good."

He sat at the little kitchen table and watched her look around the apartment while tryin' to look like she wasn't looking around the apartment. She always did the same thing back at home when she'd been away a couple days or something. Okay maybe Billy was kinda glad that Steve wasn't here for once.

"Max's got all the dope on her," Billy told her.

Susan rolled her eyes. "You're funny," she said dryly. She wandered off into the bathroom to inspect that too. She came back out after a moment, apparently satisfied that he had more than two towels now.

She started going through the kitchen; Billy felt scared that she was gonna try to make him dinner or something. "You need more groceries," she informed him in disapproval. "Have you even been eating? Don't let Maxine take all your money buying Chinese food."

"I'm not."

Sue kept on going through the place and asking him stuff about work; Billy told her that Hank was gonna let him come back in July after

school was finished. “Hank is such a sweet man,” Susan said. Billy shuddered internally. “Speaking of school being out, I have something else for you.” She put a white envelope on the table and pushed it over towards him.

Billy stared at it. “What’s that?”

“It’s money for your graduation cap and gown.”

Billy stared at the envelope in horror, then he stared at Susan in horror. She just looked back at him. “No, I - I don’t need that shit.”

“You have to order it by Monday.”

“I don’t even know if I’m graduatin’ yet,” Billy told her. “Still might not pass.”

“I think you’ll pass, I spoke to all your teachers,” Susan said. She stared at him in this meaningful way; Billy felt the real true terror. “You know, you did so well this year, Billy. You really did. I never told you that I’m proud of you.”

Jesus God he was going to fling himself off the fire escape. “Yeah, thanks,” he said in agony. “I might still fail though.”

“They’ll still let you walk even if you have to take summer classes, I asked them.”

“Yeah, but I’m not – “ he didn’t really know what to say to her. “Look, I don’t want your money, I wasn’t gonna – I ain’t gonna walk or anything. I don’t care about that.”

Her face fell so fast it’d almost be funny if he didn’t feel weird as shit. “What do you mean you don’t care? Don’t you want your diploma?”

Billy’d never really thought about graduatin’ before. Well of course he knew he would, eventually or whatever, but he didn’t think it was some kinda big deal, like Susan was makin’ it out to be. He’d always figured he’d just be wasting away in summer school for forever, then wind up at some shitty job. Wasn’t like anybody cared about it. His fuckin’ *dad* wasn’t here talking about his lame cap and gown. “They send it in the mail.”

Sue's face fell even more. "You don't want to walk with your class?"

"Not really." She was making him feel like a little kid with the way she was looking at him.

"Oh, Billy, but you *have* to go." She frowned and leaned back against the counter. She must have just come from work; her hair was up and she was wearing her ugly blouse and her stockings that had a rip in them from Max stealin' them for some dance at school. "Max and I were going to go watch you."

"Yeah, you don't have to do that."

"What about all your friends?" Susan asked him. "Your friends and Max's friends? Don't they want to see you walk?"

Billy felt like tellin' her they weren't his friends but he couldn't really make himself say it. He guessed maybe they kinda were his friends — aside from fuckin' WILL BYERS, apparently, who was still ignoring him like a little bitch; Billy hated thinkin' of the kid that way. Henderson bringing his weird crap over, Wheeler Jr telling him he was glad he hadn't died. It was too emotional. Even Lucas was givin' him another shot and Billy knew he didn't deserve it. "I don't think they really care too much about it."

"What about Steve? I'm sure he cares about it."

Billy almost passed out thinking about Harrington seeing him in his faggy cap and gown. It was so embarrassing. The worst thing was that Steve *would* wanna go. Jesus God. "Yeah, I don't know."

"Can you just think about it?" Susan asked him. "At least take the money and say you'll think about it."

Christ but she made him feel so fucking weird. It was too much. She was acting like she was his mom or something. The other worst thing was that he didn't even feel pissed off about it. He felt all stupid from her sayin' she was proud of him before. "I guess."

Sue beamed at him like the sunshine or some shit. Then she stopped smiling and started lookin' all nervous like she usually did. "Listen, Billy," she said. "I was trying to ... I can get you your money back. I

just need some time. I don't have – ”

“That's okay.”

“I'm so sorry,” Susan told him. “I swear I didn't know about that. I wouldn't have let him ... ” Shit she looked all emotional and crap. “I just don't even know what to – ”

“Yeah, don't worry about it.” He was pretty fucking sure that his old man didn't have any of the money Billy'd gave him. He thought Max'd been right when she'd said that he'd just bought his dad smokes and beer for the whole year. He was also pretty fucking sure that Sue was meaning to give him *her* money. “I don't want you to do nothin'. I'm good here now, I got my place. I don't need it.”

She was looking at him like he was a crazy person. “That was *your* money, Billy.”

“He don't got it, does he?” Billy looked at her. He put his elbows on the table and put his head in his hands. “How you gonna get it? You talk to him about it?”

“I ...” Susan said. “It didn't exactly go well. But I could – ”

“Yeah, I don't want you to do that.”

“But it's not – ”

“That's okay.”

“Um, *no*, the thing is, it's actually not okay – “

“Jesus Christ, I will go to my fuckin' graduation if you stop talking about this,” Billy begged her then realized his mistake.

Susan almost looked pleased. “Don't swear,” she told him. She stopped talking about his money though. She started making him some kind of horrible dinner instead.

Billy took his math final on Friday and he was pretty sure he passed. It was the last final of the year and they just had to do three more days of school next week for yearbook shit and for seniors to do graduation practice. Billy guessed he was fucking going to that; he felt stupid as fuck with the little tickets they'd given him in his backpack.

The Creepy Kids wanted to go to the diner to celebrate school bein' out and Steve'd said he'd come over to Billy's place later. He and Sinclair waited for Max to reach his car; she appeared after a couple minutes with Dustin in tow. They squished themselves into the slightly crushed-up backseat and Billy took them to the diner.

Wheeler Jr was sitting at their usual booth drinking a chocolate soda. The Creepy Kids all crammed themselves into their seats and started yammering on about their finals and who had set off the stink bomb in the girls' locker room. Some chick named Cindy Price had invited Sinclair to a pool party next week and Maxine was just about apoplectic over it.

Billy felt tired, and also like a sulky bitch. "Where's Byers at?" he asked Mike.

Wheeler Jr choked on his chocolate soda. "Why?"

"He ain't talkin' to me," Billy told him.

Wheeler Jr and Henderson and Sinclair all exchanged a look; Henderson went cross-eyed doing it. "He didn't talk to you at school today?" Wheeler asked him.

"Nah, I ain't seen him. He scared of me now?"

Wheeler looked terrified into his chocolate soda. "Um, no," he said. "He was really worried about you when you were gone."

"So worried," Sinclair said; Wheeler Jr kicked him under the table.

"OW, MIKE!" screamed Henderson. "I didn't even say anything this time!"

“Just tell him!” said Sinclair.

“No way!” said Mike.

“Tell me what?”

Wheeler ignored him. “Is El gonna be at your place later?” he asked, suavely changing the subject.

Billy took his soda; Wheeler made a great face. “Probably.”

“Okay, well ... I can bring Will over with me later if you want. He wants to see you.”

“I don’t fucking care if he comes over,” Billy said in a big sulk. “Don’t fucking force him.”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much,” Henderson put in like a true shitheel; he recoiled when Billy snarled loudly.

“He’s being shitty to you, he should come over and see you,” Maxine said in her womanly wisdom.

“Whatever.” Billy drank Mike’s soda, still in a big sulk. Now Wheeler Jr thought he was some fucking charity case too he guessed.

The kids parted ways. Sinclair said he’d walk the rest of the way home and took off down the road with Henderson. Max got back into Billy’s car in a big sulk too. “I bet he’s going to go to *Cindy Price’s* house,” she went off in a big snit.

Jesus God. “Nah, he’s smarter than that,” Billy told her. She looked at him mistrustfully. “Could at least go for Melanie van – SHIT, MAX!” he said when she slugged him.

At the apartment Harrington was already there, lookin’ weird on the couch. Elijane was sitting next to him and watching Madonna videos on the TV.

“Hey El!” Max said happily; they started up with their creepy girly whispering.

“Hey, sorry, I wasn’t just gonna come in,” Steve told him. “I found a straggler walkin’ down Main Street.”

“That’s okay,” Billy said. “What you wanna do?” He wondered if he was ever going to get alone time with Harrington again. There was always too many kids around the place now.

“Want to watch a movie or something?” Max asked him. “Did you go through the tapes that Will and Dustin gave me?”

Billy felt in a mood; he went and sat down at the kitchen table. “I don’t want none of Byers’ fuckin’ tapes,” he said. “What’s he, like, pissed at me or something?”

Steve and Max exchanged a look. “No, he’s ... not pissed,” Maxine said in a weird voice.

“You shitheads probably got him all freaked out when you fuckin’ blabbed your mouths that I was queer,” Billy continued, still in a mood. He guessed all the creepy kids had had some kinda big gay discussion about him while he’d been on his glorious isolated vacation.

“Sorry, I was under duress,” Steve said. He got up and started fucking going through Billy’s fridge like he lived there. Then again he had bought most of the shit that was in it. “My boyfriend yelled at me a lot and then went missing, I was a little upset.”

Billy ignored him being a dramatic bitch. “Was he freaked out?” he asked Max.

Max had a weird look on her face; Billy didn’t know what it was. “No, you know Will doesn’t care about that stuff!”

“Okay, so what’s the fucking problem?”

Now she and El were givin’ each other a look. It was so great that apparently everybody knew what the fucking problem was aside from Billy. Well he was probably the problem. “I think he was just ... surprised,” Max managed.

“So what, I’m not gonna rape him or something,” Billy said. “I ain’t

think he'd fucking ignore me." Max made another weird face and started smiling. "FUCKING what?"

"Oh, my god, you're like so upset," she said, poking fun at his sad gay life. "You're pouting like a little baby, you actually care about Will!"

Truly Billy felt offended. "Excuse me, I thought we were fuckin' friends," he told her. "You know that's the first goddamn friend I ever actually made on my own?"

"Yeah, thanks, what about me?" Steve said. He'd found the rest of the pizza that Max and Henderson had got a couple nights before.

"You don't count, that was because of Maxine."

"Yeah, and you driving around Billy's work all the time like a creep," Max added.

Steve looked nonplussed. He opened up the pizza box. "You guys are total assholes to me," he said.

Billy ignored him some more. "You can tell me if he doesn't want to hang around some faggot, I don't care," he told Max.

She slumped against the counter by the sink and made a disgusted face at him. "Will doesn't care about that!"

"I'm still the same fuckin' person."

Max and Steve gave each other another big look. "Billy, Will ... really likes you," Max said slowly.

"Yeah, I know he fucking likes me, what's the problem?"

Max stared at him like he was an idiot. "Um ... he *really* likes you."

Billy stared back. "I don't get you."

"He has a crush on you, dumbass," Steve said. He was shoving a whole slice of pepperoni pizza into his mouth.

"*STEVE!*" Max cried.

“What? He’s gonna find out anyway. You want him to just think Will hates him now?”

Billy felt totally blank. He felt his mouth tic to the side. He didn’t say anything for a while. He stared at Steve eating his pizza; Steve raised his eyebrows up at him. “Come on, you had to know,” he said around the pizza.

Billy stared some more. He stared at Max too. “The fuck’s he talkin’ about?”

Max made her biggest fish-face at him. “Billy! Come on! Everyone knows Will has a huge crush on you!”

Billy didn’t say anything. He rubbed his mouth with his good hand. He stared at Max some more.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, my god, that stupid *Friday the 13 th* marathon he wanted us to go to? He didn’t ask ME, he asked YOU, moron!”

“Yeah, all your little movies dates?” Steve added. He sounded like it was real hilarious.

Billy stared at him; Steve stared back.

“Can you talk?” Max asked him.

Billy stared at her too.. “ ... Shut the fuck up,” he whispered.

“When you drove him home from the arcade like two months ago, he would not shut up about it! IT WAS SO ANNOYING!”

“ ... Shut the fuck up,” Billy said again.

Max kind of looked pained. “God, I really shouldn’t be – look, you CAN’T be a dick about this – ”

“Why would I be a dick about it?” Billy asked her in thrall. Holy shit it was too good. It was incredible. It was hilarious. Two queers in the same town and they both had the same fuckin’ name. “D’you blame him, really?”

Harrington was rolling his eyes and eating his second slice of pizza. "Oh, my god," he muttered.

"Billy, I'm *serious*, you can't – "

"You know what, I, I just need a minute here," Billy said. He took his minute. He took two minutes. "HAHAHAHA!" he burst out; Maxine actually gasped and slugged him.

"God, you asshole, I swear to *god* if you say something shitty to him – "

"HAHAHAHA!" Billy said. "TELL HIM, TELL HIM I GOTTA WAIT TIL HE TURNS 18!"

"Jesus Christ, Bill," Steve said; Billy laughed his ass off over him and Eliane turned the TV up. Holy shit it was too good.

"Do you remember when you carried him around before we went to the diner?" Max asked him. "I think he almost fainted."

"HAHAHA!" Billy said; Steve said, "Wait, *what?* "

"I feel really bad, I shouldn't even tell you this," Max told him. "I don't want you to be an asshole to him."

Jesus Christ they thought so little of him. "I wouldn't fuckin' – "

"I don't really know what happened, I guess Mike already knew about it – "

"Yeah, that kid knows everything," Steve put in.

"I think when you were gone Will was really upset, somehow now all the guys know about it." Max thought about it. "Maybe not Dustin." She looked at Steve. "Does Dustin know?"

"Who knows." Steve was still eating. "Will hasn't really talked to me either, I feel like a shitsack. He didn't know we had a, a thing, I guess. Probably feels embarrassed, right? He spent all year hittin' on you."

“He wasn’t hittin’ on me,” Billy told him. He kind of felt like a shitsack too even though he still wanted to laugh. He’d spent a whole goddamn week sulking and whining because Byers hadn’t wanted to talk to him. He didn’t know the kid had had a crush on him. He knew what it was like to have a thing for somebody you thought you’d never have a chance with. “Why you assholes think I’m gonna be a dick all the time?”

Maxine made a face at him. “Gee, I wonder,” she said. “Look, are you going to be cool? I don’t want Mike to bring him over here and – ”

“Fuck you, I’m totally cool,” Billy said. “Hahahahahaha.”

“Oh, my god,” Steve said again. He needed to watch out; Billy had options! Holy shit. It was so great. “You look like a total nutcase right now.”

“Hahahahahaha,” Billy said. “Guess Byers thinks I look pretty good.”

“Oh, my god, BILLY!” Max said; Steve made a horrible face at him. HAHAHAHA!

“Okay, okay, I’m stopping.” He laughed to himself some more. Steve ate more pizza.

Max looked over and finally noticed Harrington being a human garbage disposal. “Steve! That was my dinner!”

“Hrmph?” Steve said like a savage. He finished chewing. “What, I’ll get you something else.” He looked over at Billy. “Do you want something?”

“Nah, I’m good.” He had to look his best for when Wills came over. HAHA!

“You didn’t even eat at the diner.”

“I’ll get you something,” Steve decided. He wandered out of the kitchen. “El? Do you want to eat?” She looked over at him but didn’t answer right away. Steve sat down next to her on the couch and they started whisperin’ about food Billy guessed.

Maxine was leaning over the kitchen table and getting all up in Billy's personal space. "Are you alright?" she asked all serious as if like she'd just delivered him terrible news or somethin'.

"Sure, I'm fine," Billy said. He'd managed to calm himself down and he didn't feel like laughing anymore. He felt kind of blank again.

She had a real intense look on her face. "Look, this is like a really big deal for Will, if he actually comes over here, I need you to not be – "

"The fuck, you think I don't know what it's like to be fifteen and queer?" Billy hissed at her. "I ain't gonna say shit to him."

"Well, he's gonna know *now*, you keep laughing!" Max made her fish-face again. "I shouldn't have even said – "

"Fucking chill out, I'm not going to be a dick."

"I didn't say you were – "

"Yeah you did," Billy told her; they did their staredown and then Max folded.

"Okay, okay." She gave him another big look and then wandered off around the counter into the living room. She joined Jane and Steve on the couch.

Billy sat at the table and continued to feel weird – he *did* feel fucking weird. He knew he was queer now and all, but maybe there was still - something wrong with him. He never really thought about people like that or about people wantin' him like that. He'd only ever really wanted to be with Harrington, and maybe that wasn't normal or whatever. Wasn't like he hadn't tried to want his girl. There'd just been nobody for him.

He hadn't thought about Byers – likin' him or gettin' a crush on him or whatever. He sat at the table and felt pretty stupid thinking about it. Thought about all the times he'd talked to the kid in the diner or when they'd gone to the movies or when they'd been at the arcade together. Shit back when those kids had been fuckin' with Will so Billy'd put his arm around the kid at his locker. Carried him around like Maxine had said and then thought maybe he'd been

embarrassing the kid with his faggy shit.

Byers probably thought Billy had been leadin' him on or some shit. He hadn't meant to do that, hadn't thought about it that way. Was like when Steve bitched that Billy was flirtin' with girls or something. He didn't mean to do that – he didn't think about it. Maybe he shouldn't bring the kid around here after all. Shit.

Harrington got up and took the kids out to get food and Billy stopped thinkin' his thoughts. He cleaned up the kitchen again and moved Max's stupid plants and Steve's stupid flowers around on the windowsill, wondered how long they'd last.

He took a shower and changed the bandage on his shoulder again. It was hard to do it by himself. Max had helped him the other day; Steve had done it on Tuesday night which had been real awkward. It was pretty ugly and Billy didn't like him seein' it.

Anyway he probably didn't really need the bandage anymore. There wasn't too much gunk coming off it now; next week he could get the stitches taken out. He was supposed to keep an eye on it, though, call the hospital if he thought it was getting infected again.

Billy guessed it felt okay. He took the last of his meds and went back out into the living room. Steve and Max and Elijane were back and they had a bunch of Chinese food.

"The old lady was working, she gave us extra egg rolls," Max informed him. She was taking up half of the Freddie Mercury couch and getting rice all in the cushions.

"Steve made you a plate," Elijane said.

"No I didn't, I was dividing up everything!"

"He gave you the best chicken pieces."

Harrington was a real sweetheart; Billy sat down alongside Max and tried to eat his food. He never seemed to want to eat too much these days. All the kids had been lookin' at him weird in the diner for not taking their food.

After a while his meds kicked in and he felt pretty okay. He went through the movies that Maxine'd brought home the other day and gave *The Terminator* to Jane to put in. Steve sat next to him on the couch but they didn't touch too much or whatever since the girls were around.

Someone knocked on the door and Max bounced up to go and answer it. The Creepy Kids filed in; it was Sinclair and Wheeler Jr and elusive little Byers.

Max and Lucas did their cute shit sayin' hi and Mike and Jane did their cute shit too. Steve looked around and got up off the couch too.

Byers looked small and miserable by the front door with his huge blue backpack. "Hey, Billy," he said.

"Hey, kid," Billy said. He scratched his neck and tried not to look too irresistible or whatever. "Ain't seen you for a minute."

"Yeah, I, I know."

Harrington was standing behind Billy on the couch; when Billy looked up he was makin' a great face. What a freeloader. "Hey, Will," he said.

Will looked like a frankly terrified Beatle. Definitely Ringo. "Hi Steve."

No one said anything; Steve took his cue. "Yeah, so, I gotta jet," he said. Billy guessed that he wasn't good for nothing now that Harrington had finished eating all the food. Steve leaned over the couch, not too close. "Hey, so you should come over this weekend, Luke and Leia really missed you," he told Billy.

Holy shit Billy had forgotten all about his babies; he felt like a total garbage person. He knew there'd been something missing in his life. "Yeah, I'll come over tomorrow."

"Me too!" yapped Maxine from the kitchen.

Steve looked amused. "Okay, I'll call you." He messed Billy's hair up and made him feel like a fucking kid. "See ya."

“Later, shithead,” Billy said romantically.

Steve left and then all the kids stood around staring at Billy and at Will; really they were ruining *The Terminator* for Billy.

Maxine cleared her throat like a little gremlin. “Lucas, I wanted to show you that thing in my room,” she announced loudly. “Mike, can you come too?”

“What thing?” Wheeler Jr said. He was standing over by Byers and Jane.

“The – uh, the vent.”

“What vent?” Max made a face and Jane tugged on Wheeler’s hand. “OH! Yeah, right.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Billy glared at Max and tried to communicate with his eyes and his soul what a fucking little bitch she was; she avoided his gaze with practiced ease. “It’ll just be like one second,” she said. She was already tugging Lucas down the hallway.

That left Billy on the couch and Byers still standing by the door lookin’ like he was about to bolt. “Wanna watch the movie with me?” Billy asked him.

“Um. Sure.” Will took his backpack off and sat down on the couch, very far away. He stared straight ahead at the TV screen. “Is this my copy?”

“Guess so. Thanks for bringin’ it over.”

“Sure,” Will said again. He looked totally miserable; Billy was pretty sure the kid didn’t have a crush on him after all. He wasn’t sure what the fuck he was supposed to do with him out here. Will said, “So ... um, how are you?”

“I’m good,” Billy said.

“Max said you were doing better. I, uh, we all tried to see you when you were in the hospital.”

"I was pretty messed up in there, you wouldn't have wanted to see me," Billy told him.

"Yes I would," Will said quietly. He fidgeted away. "Um, I'm sorry that I didn't come over or anything before. I figured you were busy with um, with Max and ... with Steve."

"Guess you heard about that, huh?"

"Yeah," said Will. He was still looking at the TV. "He kind of ... told us all."

"Yeah. Figured."

"Yeah," Will said too. "So I just ... "

Billy waited. And waited and waited. "Don't like me no more?" he said. He couldn't help himself; the words slipped out without meaning to. He was such a dick.

"No, that's – not it!" Will said. "I, I don't care about you and Steve, I think that's – " he stopped for a long time. "I think that's really great. I just didn't ... know about it."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, kid."

Wills had his hands folded over his knees and he wasn't looking at Billy. He wasn't lookin' at the TV either. "I'm sorry for, well, I'm sorry that I didn't talk to you this week. I was – really upset about you and El. But I, I didn't know what to say to you. I guess you – " his mouth twisted to the side; in the light of the TV his skin looked white. "I mean, everybody knows. I guess you know now."

Oh god. Oh fuck. Billy felt like a piece of shit for makin' jokes in his head earlier. He guessed they were gonna have some big gay talk now. "That's okay," he said.

"Max said that I was making you feel bad, I didn't want to do that," Will told him. "I, um. I just. I felt stupid. I, I mean, I think – I think it's great," he said again. "Um, about you and Steve. I just didn't know."

“Yeah, I’m sorry I didn’t tell ya.”

“That’s okay, I didn’t – “ The kid laughed. He looked a lot like his mom doing that, was weird. “I knew that you would never – I just, um. Well, I was really happy when we went to – the, the movies and everything. I liked hanging out with you. That means something to me.”

“Sure, me too.”

Will’s face looked pink and miserable; he still wasn’t looking at Billy. It struck him in this really painful way, like a kick in the face. He could remember being thirteen and overwhelmed, sittin’ in his neighbor’s garage. *Don’t look at that, baby*. Hoped Joyce wouldn’t say some shit like that to him. Mom like that, she had to know. Will said, “So I just, I don’t want you to think that I think it’s gross or something. I, I really don’t.”

“Yeah, I guess I know that,” Billy said.

“Okay. So, so we’re good?”

“Sure are,” Billy said. They sat there for a couple minutes more; he felt like he was supposed to say somethin’ else. What, he didn’t know. “Look, I just – ah, you know I’m like way too old for you, right?”

Will’s eyes practically bugged out of his head; he looked totally mortified. “YEP, I know that,” he squeaked. “We, we really don’t have to do this.”

“Okay,” Billy said. “I’m just sayin’.”

“Yep, I know.”

“Maybe if I didn’t have someone or somethin’. You’re cool and all,” Billy told him. “You know, you could get whoever you want.”

Truly the kid looked like he wanted to die. Billy would have liked to hear it at that age though. “Okay, we REALLY don’t have to do this,” Will begged him.

“I’m just telling you.” He didn’t know what to say to the kid. He was

a *kid* – Billy never would have thought. Well he never would have thought of anyone. He never would have thought *Steve* but he had Steve. It wasn't even like – well, there couldn't be nobody else but Steve for Billy. He felt real bad tellin' the kid.

“Yeah, I, I know,” Will stammered out. “I mean, I knew that you didn't – I didn't even know that you were – “

“Yeah, I am.”

“Uh, me too, I guess,” Will said. “But I – yeah, we don't, we really don't have to talk about it.”

Really Byers was his kinda guy. Well, not *that* guy but Billy got it. “Cool with me,” he said.

“Okay. So, we're cool?” Byers looked over at him all hesitant.

“Sure are,” Billy told him. “You know I still got your back, right?”

“Yes. I know.”

“Anybody ever fuckin' messes with you, we beat 'em up.”

“Definitely.”

Billy felt better but he still felt weird. He still felt like he needed to say more shit; being around Max and Harrington and Jane and all made him too fuckin' emotional.

He and the kid just sat on the couch like two slugs. “Look, you know if you ever need to like, talk or whatever, you can talk t'me, right?”

Wills made a little face. “Yeah, well, I, I can't really talk to *you* about having a crush on – on *you*,” he said wryly.

He was such a fucking prize; Billy started laughing. “Can if you want,” he managed.

“Thanks, I, I think I'm okay.”

“Can talk to Steve too if you want,” Billy said, then thought that

sounded patronizing.

Byers looked like a distressed little fairy. Okay shit fuck Billy really needed to stop thinkin' that shit in his head. "I – feel bad, he doesn't think that I'm mad, does he?"

"Nah, you're good," Billy told him.

"Okay." They sat there for a little bit longer. "So, we – we can stop, uh, talking about this, right?"

"Sure can."

"Okay. Good." Will finally turned the movie up and Billy felt okay. There was a big explosion happenin' on the TV. Linda Hamilton kinda looked like a cocker spaniel with her puffy hair. "It would be totally cool if, if they did a sequel to this one day."

"Yeah." They could do time travel or some shit; Billy could dig it. "Like with her kid or whatever."

"They'd probably totally screw it up though."

"I dunno. Might be good."

They watched the rest of *The Terminator*. Maxine and the rest of the brats didn't even come out til the credits started rolling; truly Billy felt blessed.

7. Chapter Seven

Summary for the Chapter:

The Monster Squad was excited about the skating rink too. Dustin had even called him at work today on his lunch break to talk about what they were going to wear.

Steve said he didn't think that it really mattered. Dust said it definitely mattered because they both had dates for once.

"Yeah, I don't think, I really wouldn't call this thing a date," Steve told him.

"Oh really? Say that to Billy," Dustin said with the heavy foreboding of one who had had study hall with Bill for a year and hung up on him. Steve stared at the phone in terror.

Chapter Seven

The last full week of June was hazy and hot and it seemed to go by in about ten whole minutes. It was funny how that happened sometimes. Steve remembered going to work all giddy on Monday morning. Then he left work all giddy on Friday afternoon.

Okay, obviously a lot had happened in between. There was a lot of Billy, Billy and Max, El and Max. Steve'd stayed over and slept in Bill's bed like three times this week. In the office on Wednesday Joanne had told him he looked like he was having a summer romance. Steve was pretty sure that meant that he was coming in lookin' like crap and she was just putting it nicely. He needed to stop doing that, or at least bring his hair stuff over to Bill's. He *was* having a summer romance though – well he hoped it wasn't just for summer.

He'd been to Kmart for the first time, his new favorite spot. Max said

that next week they could go to Walmart and she'd laughed when Bill thumped her on the head. Friday he'd taken her and Eleven to get Chinese food and El hadn't thrown him around or anything. In fact she'd given him her fortune cookie. Steve had felt like that'd been a really big bonding moment for them.

He'd kinda wanted to stay over at Bill's on Friday night too. He just felt like he and Bill were doing really good and he'd wanted to stay. A bunch of the Monster Squad had been there though so Steve had peaced out. Will had been there and he hadn't really been talking to Billy or hanging around him since he'd been back. Steve'd thought they should have their time to talk it out or whatever.

Really he thought the whole thing with Will was kind of shitty but he wasn't going to say anything about it. Like Bill had crashed his car and got beat up a bunch of times, but whatever. He'd basically been tortured for like a week, but whatever. He'd been asking about Will for a week too but Steve wasn't going to say anything.

He got it he guessed. He did get it. Will had had a huge thing for Billy – it was so obvious – and then he'd found out that Bill was with Steve.

Steve knew it sucked to not get who you wanted and he knew how kids were. He didn't think that Will was *trying* to be a dick about it or anything. He probably felt stupid; Steve definitely understood feeling stupid.

He just hoped that the kid wasn't going to continue to be a dick about it. Billy really liked Will. Steve would kick his butt if Billy got all sad over him and he didn't want to have to do that. He liked Will too even if Will was after his guy – ha.

Billy had said that Will was the only friend he'd ever made on his own which wasn't true. He'd really been sulking about it like a little baby before they'd got the Chinese food and the kids had come over – Mike and Lucas and Will. Mike was there for El and Lucas was there for Max; Steve guessed Will was there for Billy. It was totally adorable.

Anyway Steve hadn't wanted the kid to feel weird or bad about him

being over there; he could let them have their talk. He didn't want to, like, rub Billy's and his relationship in Will's face by bein' there. Okay maybe a tiny part of him did. But only like ten percent and that was just the part of him that wanted to show Billy off anyway.

It had still been kinda early so he went over to Dustin's house. He hadn't seen him in a few days and he'd gone to Denny's without him on Tuesday – going to a chain restaurant without Dust was like some kinda betrayal apparently so he hoped Dust wasn't too pissed. In April there'd been this huge debacle when Dustin's girlfriend Rebecca had gone to the Baskin Robins without him; Steve had had to hear about it for two weeks.

Dust wasn't too pissed. On Friday nights he always ate dinner with his mom and then they watched a movie together (then sometimes Dustin went out with the guys and ate a second dinner. He and Steve were big fans of second dinner). Steve thought that was kinda cute; two years ago he'd have thought it was super lame. He went over and watched the movie with Dustin and his mom. They watched *Airplane!* which was the height of comedy according to Mrs. Henderson.

Steve's mom was there when he got home which was kinda unusual for a Friday night. She had Luke and Leia inside with her; after eight years he guessed she was used to them and maybe even kinda liked them. She acted all surprised to see *him* which was so funny. Steve didn't mention how she hadn't been home for practically two weeks while he'd been having a crisis.

Not that she had known he had been having a crisis or whatever. Anyway he didn't want to get into it with her. Mom let him have a whiskey with her and then he went to bed.

Saturday he got up early again and went to play hockey with the guys; he didn't mind getting up early if it was for sports. They played for two hours and Steve did better as goalie.

There were only nine of them so they didn't have proper teams or anything. His side won even though they only had four people; Alex's team had to go and buy breakfast for them at the corner deli.

Everyone hung out on the street and talked for a while. There were

two guys from Coopersville which was the town over; Steve didn't know them too well but he finally learned their names, Grayson and Andrew. Steve was glad he hadn't got stuck with a name like Grayson. Andrew was okay. Steve's mom had actually wanted to name him Andrew after her grandfather which was way worse than Steve. He'd got stuck with that as his middle name.

Kyle was in a mood because his older sister was moving home with her new baby and she was gonna take over his room for the summer. They all listened to him bitch for a while and then Kyle asked Steve what he'd been up to this week. Steve didn't have any fun stories about work or anything new to complain about with *his* family so he said that his friend Bill had got a new place and he'd been helping him move. It was mostly true.

"Oh, yeah, you mean Billy Hargrove? I thought you hung out with him," Alex said. "He's cool?"

Steve was eating his sandwich. "Yeah, he's not that bad."

"I heard so much shit about him last year," Kyle said. "He's pretty crazy, right?"

Great, he was gonna get pissed off in two seconds. Shouldn't have mentioned Bill. "No, he's all right," Steve said shortly.

"Okay, well, you know all the dirt. Is that thing about him and Ms. Nichols true?"

Ms. Nichols was one of the history teachers at the high school. She was real young and pretty hot. Back in junior year it'd been like a game to try and get her to tutor you after class. Steve didn't think Billy'd ever had her class. He tried not to make a face. "Yeah, no, that didn't happen."

All the guys looked disappointed (even Grayson and Andrew who probably didn't know who Billy was). "Oh. What about that shit with the girls' soccer team?"

Jesus. Maybe the boys' soccer team. Steve definitely didn't say that. "That's not true either," he said. "He's not really like that. He mostly

just babysits his sister.” *And makes out with me.*

The guys looked disappointed some more. “Well, you should ask him to come play with us,” Alex told him. “Probably be better than Tommy. We could do five on five then.”

“Yeah, I’ll ask him.”

“We don’t really need five, we already kicked your ass,” Kyle told Alex. They started fighting each other, not real serious-like. Steve ate Kyle’s sandwich too since he was busy pushin’ Alex around. “STEVE, ARE YOU SERIOUS?” Kyle said.

“What?” Steve said.

He felt kind of annoyed or weird that people thought all this shit about Bill without really knowing him. He always felt weird about it. He was trying not to get too annoyed or, like, protective or whatever so he had needed to eat the sandwich.

He knew *why* they thought all the shit. Hawkins wasn’t exactly the most exciting place in the world. Steve loved his town though and he didn’t think it was for shit or too boring like Kyle and Alex and Tommy and Carol and even Bill always went on about. He’d been to a lot of cities with his mom – back when he was a kid that was a thing they’d did together, like every break or vacation they’d go to a new state. Steve hadn’t been to too many great places but he’d been to a bunch of cities. Indianapolis of course but other places too, like Detroit and Ann Arbor, a couple beach towns on the east coast. They’d gone to New Jersey once and it hadn’t been that bad like everyone said. Louisville in Kentucky, that’d been pretty nice. Pittsburgh and Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Savannah, Georgia was really beautiful too. They’d gone to Florida on vacation once; Mom said you couldn’t go too south in Florida or people got super racist.

He was always ready to go back to Hawkins though, even though it was a small town and it wasn’t real exciting. It was his home. People never really moved *to* Hawkins but sometimes they moved away from it. Max and Billy had been the first people who were new in town for a while, then Max’s friend Beverly, and no one had moved in

since. They were real exciting; new news. Dustin said that people even said some stuff about Max sometimes. Steve knew that people thought certain things about Bill because he looked a certain way (super hot and built) and had kind of a loud mouth sometimes. Okay a lot.

Bill wasn't really a crazy playboy though even though he kinda acted like one sometimes. Or maybe that had just been Steve thinking shit about Billy too. The only reason he was a little crazy was because his dad beat on him all the time. It was like the only thing he knew how to do was fight or something. Steve just always hated hearing shit about Billy that wasn't true. Probably he was all dopey about Bill because they were hooking up or whatever but he knew what was true. He did now, anyway.

Bill would gag and probably punch Steve in the face if he heard him thinking like that so Steve stopped thinking like that. It was just the guys anyway and they were okay; they didn't mean anything by it. It *would* be cool if some guy had gotten with the whole girls' soccer team. It hadn't been Billy, though.

After he hung out with the guys he went back home. Max and Bill had said they wanted to come over today because Steve'd said Billy had to see Luke and Leia. He had no clue when they were gonna show up or if they even really would but they actually popped over about a half hour after he'd gotten back, before he'd even showered.

Max made Billy stand out in the backyard so that Luke and Leia would run out and see him. Bill said she was dumb but he totally wanted to do it anyway; he had his big grin on his face. Steve went around back to the kitchen to let the dogs out. They ran past Max and knocked Bill right over in about four seconds. Steve pictured Bill's Converse flyin' right off his feet like in a cartoon.

"HEY! GUYS!" he said; Luke and Leia ignored him like usual.

"AHHHH! HAAAAHAHA!" Bill said like a total nutcase. He put his arms around the dogs.

Bill hugged the dogs for like ten minutes ("That's real nice, he could have done that to me last week," Steve said all grumpy and Max

laughed) and then he ran around with them for like twenty. "WHERE'S YOUR BALL?" he kept asking Leia and she'd bring him everything but her ball. Eventually Max and Steve got bored and went inside to let Bill have his big reunion.

Steve sat at the table and Max made coffee all serious because she was an addict. Steve's mom hadn't even let him drink coffee until he was sixteen. It was funny because he'd been drinking beer since he was twelve; there was no way she didn't know.

"EHEHEHEHE!" Billy said like a crazy hyena outside. Max rolled her eyes. She was goin' through Steve's mail like she lived there.

"Maybe he'll get tired out and he won't be so annoying later," she said.

"Yeah, I don't know about that." There was a huge crash and a splash from outside and then Billy laughed like a lunatic. "Jesus, please tell me he didn't – "

Max was looking over Steve's shoulder and out past the screen-door. She had a great expression on her face. "Yeah, Luke and Leia are in the pool," she said.

Steve sighed. "Okay," he said.

"No, I think he's going to get them out."

"HAHAHAHA!" Billy said from outside. There was another loud splash.

"Nevermind," Max said.

Billy came over to the door about ten minutes later with a guilty look on his face; he stood dripping chlorine water into the kitchen. Then he stopped looking guilty. "You guys look like a fuckin' commercial in here with your mail and shit," he said. He looked at Steve. "Why'd you take your Indiana State papers back from me? I wasn't done with 'em."

Steve didn't really know what to say. Probably shouldn't say *Well, you were kind of kidnapped at the time* . He didn't know if Bill knew

they'd been through his room either and he felt pretty guilty. "Uh, I wasn't – "

"Steve's dogs aren't allowed in the pool! They'll get sick!" Max interrupted him. She gave Billy a towel that Steve'd got from the downstairs bathroom.

"Sorry. I'll dry 'em off."

"It doesn't really matter, my mom's not home."

Bill messed around outside some more and dried the dogs off, then Luke and Leia ran into the kitchen and dragged grass clippings everywhere. Luke collapsed under the table as if he was dying. He licked Steve's shoe for a few minutes like he'd just remembered he existed.

"Get away from me," Steve told him.

Billy dripped onto the kitchen floor like a wet dog. "Can I borrow some of your preppy clothes?"

"Yeah, not if you're going to insult them."

Bill gave him a lascivious look and leaned on the counter. "Preppy's not an insult," he said.

Okay they didn't need to start that right now. Steve gave him a shirt to wear. Bill sat at the table in Steve's polo and his boxer shorts; Max looked pretty disgusted by him.

"I thought, uh, you weren't supposed to run around like that," Steve told him. Probably like a Den Dad but whatever.

"I'm cool," Billy said. "I feel great."

He looked great too. He also looked super silly sitting at the table in his underwear. Steve kinda wished his mom would come home, just to see the look on Bill's face if he got caught in his boxers that had donuts on them.

Steve looked at the grass clippings and the muddy paw-prints all over

the floor. Okay maybe it was a really good thing his mom wasn't home.

"I gotta shower," he said.

Bill looked more lascivious (Steve was pretty sure that was another SAT word). He leaned on the table. "Do you need help?" he said. Max said, "Oh, my god," and he started laughing.

Steve went and took a shower. He guessed he didn't really need help, though it would be nice. He'd never taken a shower with anyone before. Then Bill got his pants back on and after they'd cleaned up the kitchen they decided to go back to his place.

They found Max's friend Beverly along the way, yelling at some guy at the end of Broad Street (Steve was pretty sure it was the infamous Ryan Pearson). Bev was a sophomore but Steve didn't really remember her from the high school; he knew Max had said she was kinda new in town too. She had red hair like Max did but cut real short like a boy's. Dustin and the rest of the nerds thought she was real pretty.

Bev had some pot on her so Billy said she was allowed in the apartment. Then everyone was hungry after the pot – Steve didn't smoke but Beverly blew it in his face like a little shit and Bill yelled at her – so they went and got a pizza at Rino's and found the rest of the brat pack there with Eleven.

Somehow they all ended up back at Bill's place even though Bill had said no one was coming over but Steve, and he'd said 'Fuck you' to Dustin twice. But then El wanted to come over and so the rest of them had ended up coming along too. Bill screamed his head off for three hours that they were fucking trashing the place.

"I thought you had a dishwasher, don't worry, I am an expert now, I did Steve's dishes like four times," Dustin said. He didn't mention that he'd flooded the kitchen two of those times.

Max had found some flyer from the mail at Steve's house for the roller rink over in Loch Nora and she and Bill were all excited about it. They'd basically been talking about it all day so far. Max yelled at

all the guys for not telling her that there was a place to go roller skating around here.

“It was closed like all winter, I guess they redid the inside,” Dust told her. He was eating all the food that Steve had bought for Bill’s place at Kmart the other night. All the candy bars were gone already and the kids had made nachos.

Just about everybody had asked why Billy had a bunch of big fancy flowers in his kitchen. They were still doing pretty good a week later; Steve wondered if Bill had been watering them. Probably Max had been.

“Thirty dollar flowers,” El said; Steve guessed that was important. He wondered if she knew how to count money or whatever. He’d been sittin’ on the floor with her because she’d just came and sat down by him. She’d handed him a deck of cards and so he started teaching her how to play War since it was easiest.

She didn’t really understand why it was called War. Steve didn’t know either. He’d had to tell her that not every card game was called War. Everything just had a name. *Like you*, he said. She nodded real serious, then beat him with an ace (Steve’d had to explain that an ace wasn’t always just a one. Actually cards were pretty hard if you hadn’t grown up with ‘em he guessed).

“WHO GOT YOU THIRTY DOLLAR FLOWERS?” Dustin asked like a moron.

“Who do you fuckin’ think?” Bill asked him.

Dust’s mouth formed a perfect circle. “Ooooooh,” he said. Then he smiled like a nerd. “What, Mr. Morris?”

“You little asshole – ”

“Dustin, you never got *me* thirty dollar flowers,” his girl Rebecca said before they could kill each other. Steve liked her a lot; he had no clue if she really knew all about him and Bill, but probably from what Dust had said before. “What’s up with that?”

“Uh, I’ve never had thirty dollars in my life!”

“Mike had his ninth birthday party at the skating rink,” Will put in. “Remember?”

Mike made a sour face and Will smiled at it. Steve guessed they had some beautiful memories there or something. “Yeah, I remember.”

Max and Billy were really excited about the skating rink. Really jazzed up, Billy would say. Max asked if they were gonna go and Bill said of course they were gonna go. “What they do there, blades or skates?” he asked.

“I think just skates,” Will told him. Steve guessed that they were cool again; he wondered if he’d ever get to hear about what he and Bill had talked about yesterday. “Mike has to wear the big ones with the bumpers on front.”

“WHY ARE YOU TELLING HIM THIS?” Mike asked; Billy laughed and laughed.

“It looks so good,” Lucas said; Billy laughed some more.

Dustin was over in the corner of the living room making a nuisance of himself and going through Bill’s bookshelf; he finally had some stuff on it. “Wait, so you can really skate?” he asked Billy.

Bill looked offended. “Sure I can skate.”

“Really?”

“Sure, I used to take my – “ he stopped for a second. “Used to go like every other weekend back at home.”

Steve guessed he used to take his old girlfriend skating or something. Bill got kind of weird about Tracey sometimes; sometimes he’d talk about her a lot but then not at all. It wouldn’t matter if he mentioned her. It’s not like Steve would get all jealous or something. Okay maybe a little jealous but it shouldn’t really matter because Bill had said he was ... anyway he’d just been with her for a real long time.

Billy flopped back down on the couch and looked at Steve. “You gonna go skatin’ with me?” he asked. He really asked like in front of the kids and all.

Steve felt kind of weird, not just because Billy was asking in front of the kids. He and Max were all pumped about it; Steve didn't really know how to tell him that skating wasn't really a cool thing to do here in Hawkins.

Dust and the rest of the brat pack were (usually) great but they definitely weren't *cool*. Skating was kind of, like, a girl thing in Hawkins or a preppy thing. Max and Billy told Steve he was a preppy all the time but he guessed he wasn't that much of a prep. Once Carol'd wanted to go skating and Steve and Tommy'd made fun of her for like a whole week. She'd gotten so mad at them that they'd had to take her; it'd been this huge thing. Then they just made fun of everything the whole time and she'd gotten mad again.

Billy didn't really seem to care about what was nerdy or girly or preppy though. He just did what he wanted and he never really cared about what people thought. It was one of the things that Steve really liked about him. So it made him feel sad to tell Bill, "Uh, I can't really skate or anything."

Bill stared at him like he was an insane person. "What you mean you can't skate?"

"Uh, I mean I never really did it. It's kinda, like, it's like a girl thing here."

"That's sexist," Beverly told him. El beat him with a six (hearts) to his two (clubs).

Bill looked offended again. "No it ain't," he said to Steve.

"Okay, I didn't say I wouldn't skate, I just meant, uh, I never really went before, I'm not that good at it."

"That is so sad, Steve," Max told him. She looked truly stricken.

"Don't worry, Mike's not good at it either," Dust soothed him.

"YOU'RE SO FUNNY!" Mike screamed from the kitchen.

"You and Mike can get the skates with the bumpers on them," Max said; she was cracking herself up.

“Steve has like huge troll feet, I don’t think they make the bumpers in a size thirteen.” That was Dustin telling all of Steve’s business like usual.

“This is great, can you not start talking about my shoe size for one day?”

“Steve has abnormally large feet for his height,” Dustin announced.

“No I don’t, I am almost six foot tall,” Steve said.

“He’s really insecure about it, nobody say anything when we go skating.”

Steve sighed. “Thank you Dustin.” Dust gave him a thumbs up.

“That is so interesting,” Bev said happily. She was sitting on the smaller couch in between Max and Lucas with her hands all folded in her lap like she was his mom’s therapist. “Tell us more about what you have that’s abnormally large.”

Billy started laughing, a lot. He put his head down against the couch cushion. Then he picked it up again. It was dumb but the light from the TV was shining on him and it made his eyes look really blue. “I’ll teach you how to skate,” he said.

Steve took a second to compose himself because, damn, Bill was really gorgeous. “I know how to skate,” he said. “I’m just not, you know, good at it.”

“So you’re gonna skate with me?”

“I, uh, I didn’t decide yet,” Steve told him.

Bill looked real amused by him; Steve guessed that he knew that Steve was teasing him. Like he wouldn’t do whatever the hell Billy wanted to do.

Well mostly. He didn’t really feel like falling on his damn face at the skating rink in front of everybody. He *didn’t* think they made the bumpers for a size thirteen. Bill said, “But you’re gonna go, right?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll go with you.” They were probably gonna play great music there, so that was something.

“Okay, *awesome* , so we’re all going to go, right?” Dustin said.

Mike finally came back from doing whatever he’d been doing in the kitchen; he had a glass of water and was looking askance at Bill like he thought maybe Billy was gonna kill him for using one of his cups. Then he stopped looking like Bill was gonna kill him and started looking like he wanted to die. “Uh, *no*, we’re not all going to go, that sounds like actual torture.”

El looked up from totally annihilating Steve at War. “You won’t go and skate with me?” she asked Mike in her little voice.

Mike made the dopiest face Steve’d ever seen and almost spilled his water on himself. Geez Steve hope he didn’t look like that when he was lookin’ at Bill. Young love, it was so gross.

“I, I, I mean, yeah, I’ll go with you,” Mike stammered. “If that’s what you want.” They smiled at each other like in a cute commercial.

Max made her goldfish face looking at them. “Are you going to skate with me, Lucas?” she asked all sweet.

Lucas polished his fingernails on his shirt. “Maybe if I have time,” he said like a stud; Max scowled.

“Okay, so great, me and Becca, Steve and Billy, you and El, Max and Lucas, Bev and whoever she’s gonna be with next week,” Dust started going on.

“Listen, Sloth, you need to shut your fat mouth before I – “

“I’m offended, I resemble that remark,” Dustin said; Bev grinned at him. “We just have to find someone for Will.”

“DUSTIN!” cried Rebecca.

“Thank, thank you so much,” Will said.

“I’ll skate with ya, kid,” Billy told him. “I’m real good.” He missed the

deeply lovelorn look that Will gave him. Steve sighed internally and Max sighed out loud.

"I'll skate with you too, don't worry," Dust said.

"Dustin, literally no one wants to skate with you, even Rebecca, stop talking," Lucas told him.

Dustin ignored him and kept talking. "No one gets left behind at Rollerworld." He said, "ROLLERWORLD!" like a nerd.

"ROLLERWORLD!" said Max and Bev; Steve laughed at them.

"Okay, guys, so when are we going? We need to plan this out." Dust was all excited. "I'm free every night this week aside from Tuesday, my mom is making a lasagna."

The kids all hemmed and hawed and talked for a million years decidin' the best night. Finally they decided on Wednesday night. It was the last day of real classes for most of them and then Prom was gonna be over the weekend. Then everybody had to talk about how Billy wasn't going to his Prom for a million years.

"Do I look like I need to go to my fuckin' Prom?" Bill asked. He was all crashed out on the couch and he was wearing the sling for his arm now. Steve thought he'd probably hurt it earlier even though he'd said *I feel great*. He looked way better now but he was still kinda bruised up.

Dustin started grinning like when he thought something was real funny. Steve was glad it was so hilarious to him. Not really. "You could still go, Steve could like sign on as a chaperon," he said. "You guys could –"

"*Dustin!*" Rebecca cried again and Steve said, "Okay, knock it off."

"I'm just saying!"

"You run your goddamn mouth too much," Bill told him. He was just watchin' the TV and not flipping out; Steve couldn't believe he wasn't flipping out. Bill had said before *I'll tell whoever you want* but it was kind of a lot. Even Steve kind of thought it was a lot, all the kids

knowing or whatever.

He felt kind of bad that Bill wasn't going to his prom though. Dances were a big deal around here and it was the last time Bill could ever go to one at the high school. Even Steve'd gone to his prom last year. He'd been fucking miserable but still. Well Prom itself had been okay. The misery was, like, a general thing that had been going on at the time.

He bet Billy looked great in a tux too or whatever. He kinda wished that they were in an alternate dimension or something where he really could chaperon the dumb dance and he'd get to see Bill there or something. Not like as his stupid date or anything because Billy hated that crap. You know, just to see him. It'd be nice.

Then again, maybe not, Steve told himself. The last time they'd been together at the high school, it hadn't exactly ended so great.

Obviously Dustin didn't know all about that. He looked all sulky with Steve and Billy and Becca telling him off. "I was being serious," he told Billy. "I support your relationship!"

"That's great, I appreciate it," Billy told him. "Ain't you leavin'?" He kicked at Dust so that he and Rebecca would get off the couch; Steve took their spot.

"Um, no, I'm not leaving actually, I was literally just about to – "

Rebecca grabbed Dustin's wristwatch and peered at his arm. She made a face, then dropped his wrist. "Dusty, why are you so cold? It's after nine, I have to be home to put my little brother in bed in twenty minutes," she said so Dustin agreed to leave.

Steve didn't know how it was past nine already. Time always seemed to go by so fast when he was with Billy. They hadn't even been watching anything good on the TV and Dustin hadn't shut the hell up about Rollerworld and Steve's huge feet the whole time.

The rest of the kids got up to go too. Eleven said she was allowed to walk home alone if it was before ten o'clock. Steve didn't know about all that but Bill said it was okay.

Max and Lucas did their cutesy shit with each other in the kitchen for a while and then the Monster Squad took off. It was just Bev left; she and Max put their pajamas on and made popcorn. Billy let them put some Molly Ringwald movie on the TV.

“Is this the one with the earring?” Steve asked him.

“Yeah,” Bill said. He was still flopped out on the big leather couch with Steve. He’d got up when the kids had been leaving and now he had his head in Steve’s lap. Steve had told himself not to get a boner; it was mostly working.

He looked at Billy in the blue light of the TV. Bill’s hair looked really curly right now and Steve wanted to touch him. He was *right there*. It was like he had to keep telling himself that Bill was right there. His hair looked all soft even though he’d been in the pool earlier.

Steve didn’t know if he should really touch him or not though, especially since the girls were here and all. Bev wasn’t really paying attention to them but still. He didn’t want Billy to get all pissed off over something stupid. They’d had a good day together and Steve didn’t want it to get screwed up. Bill looked weirdly small again on the couch with his arm in the stupid sling and it made Steve feel all weird. Like he should take care of him or something but Billy would totally kill him if he knew Steve wanted to do that.

“You want me to go home?” Steve asked him.

Billy didn’t answer for a couple seconds, then he gave him the remote. “Nah,” he said. “You can stay.”

He woke up in Bill’s bed on Sunday morning. Well, he thought it was morning. It felt late even though the blinds were drawn and the room was still dark. It was the first time that they hadn’t had to get up early together to leave for work or school. Bill had said that next week he started taking these welding classes out in Eastgate so he’d have to be up early on Saturdays too.

Steve thought Sunday was a great day; they should have more of

them. Billy climbed on top of him on the bed and made out with him and ground himself down against him for twenty minutes. He didn't say that Steve needed to get up and brush his teeth or anything either. It was great. Steve touched him under his shirt and put his hands on the small of his back and in his hair. Bill's body felt really good on top of his; his skin was so warm.

Then Billy stopped making out with him and climbed off him. He put his t-shirt back on (Steve had just got that off him five minutes ago with one hand and he'd been pretty proud of himself) and sat up. His t-shirt was white and said 'Red Hot Chili Peppers' on it; Steve didn't know what that was.

"No, hey, what are you doing, where are you going?" Steve asked him. He reached out for him.

Bill stared at him like he was dumb. His eyes were always like these different colors of blue – different shades or whatever. It was kinda dark in the room right now so they were this real dark blue and Steve felt hypnotized. He stared back at him too. Billy held his gaze and then said real serious like a nerd, " *Fraggle Rock*' s on at ten-thirty." He laughed at Steve's face and smacked him in the chest. "What, I'm respectin' you," he said.

Oh. That. "No, no, no, no, I'm good. Debase me, please," Steve said. Bill just laughed at him and tossed him his shirt from last night too. He was already like halfway out the door.

Steve sat there in the bed with his huge boner and held his t-shirt. He guessed that Bill thought he had been being serious about the no-sex thing he'd blabbed out last week. He hadn't meant NO SEX but he'd just wanted Bill to know that they didn't have to do that all the time, because sometimes it seemed like Billy thought they had to do it all the time. Well, okay – they *could* do it all the time but they didn't *have* to. Steve just wanted him to know that. There should be a line of clarity or whatever.

Right now the line of clarity was that Steve wanted to do it. The stuff, whatever it was that he and Bill did. It was nice that Billy had actually listened to him and that he was making this big effort but right now Steve just kinda wanted Bill's dick in his mouth. Like a lot.

He wanted it really bad.

He didn't really know how to get to that point though. Well, obviously he knew how. It wasn't like it was hard. Hah. It was just that they'd had that big talk last week and all, and now they were just kind of hanging out without ... talking about what they'd talked about. Which was fine and everything. Things were better with them now, but things were *weird* too, plus there were always kids around now.

Steve didn't know how to, like, start it with him. He guessed mostly Billy had done that part before and it made him feel kind of shitty. He hoped Bill knew that he wanted him too.

Okay, well. He guessed right now Bill didn't want him — he wanted *Fraggle Rock* and the rest of his nerdy morning cartoons. That was okay; Steve wasn't actually gonna die without Billy's dick in his mouth or whatever. He put his boner away and got dressed too.

Beverly was still over from last night and she was sitting on the red leather couch with Billy. She was dressed now and had on black overall shorts with one of Max's baggy ringer t-shirts on under them. She gave Steve a real speculative look when he came out of Bill's bedroom but then she smiled and didn't say anything. Steve guessed she had to know about them and all from yesterday.

“HAHAHAHA!” Bill said at the TV like a loon.

Steve went into the little kitchen and got some cereal. He liked the kitchen here; the one at his house always seemed too big. Someone had moved Bill's or Max's plants around and one of the ferns was on the table now. There were a few petals from the flowers he'd got Bill on the floor; they probably didn't have too much time left.

Max was slumped at the table with her fancy coffee – it seemed like everyone liked the Donald Duck mug which Steve found hysterical for some reason. She was in her huge shirt that had George Michael's face on it. She watched Steve pour himself the last of the Honeycombs and she raised her eyes at him, probably at his big hair. “We need more food,” she informed him.

“Okay.”

“Can you drive us later? Just ‘cause your car’s bigger.” *And not all smashed up*, Steve could see her not adding.

“Sure, you gotta work today?”

“Mm. Not til five,” she told him. “You don’t mind?”

“Nah, of course not.” He looked through the fridge. Dust really had eaten everything last night. They had two milks because Max like fat free milk and Billy liked two-percent. Bill had said Max’s butt would explode if she drank two-percent and Max had hit him four times. Steve took the two-percent; luckily he did not have that issue.

“I actually have money this time, I got paid,” Max said when he sat down across from her. He was already halfway done eating his cereal. “I’ve got like forty bucks.”

“Yeah, that’s okay.” They sat there and Max watched him shovel Honeycombs into his face. Steve looked past her and watched the TV too. The way the kitchen was set up you could see into the living room past the counters. It was kinda like one big space, he guessed, but the counters broke it up into the kitchen. “Hey, can we go to Walmart?” Steve asked her.

She made a face like he was being funny and then smiled for real. “I dunno. BILLY, CAN WE GO TO WALMART?”

Bill managed to stop laughing at the TV for two seconds. “I guess,” he said. He flopped his head back on the couch and looked at Steve upside down. “Hey, come sit with me,” he said.

Steve finished eating his cereal. “Okay,” he said.

Bev nicked the remote and moved over onto the floor so that he could sit next to Bill. When Steve sat down Billy put his arm around him on the back of the couch which was nice and all. They sat like that for a couple minutes until *Fraggle Rock* ended; it was an hour block. Then Steve looked at him and said, “You need to shower.”

Billy gave him a real offended look. He moved his arm back and

Steve laughed. “Whatever.”

“Come on, put your arm back, I’m joking.”

“Too late, you lost it,” Bill said. He was watching the TV again. ”I only do like one nice thing per day.” He was such a drama queen.

“No you don’t,” Steve said; Billy gave him a look.

Bev pushed herself up and tossed the remote into Billy’s lap. ”This flirting thing you guys do, it’s totally gross.”

“Right?” Max mumbled from the kitchen. She was eating cereal now too (Cocoa Pebbles which he totally hadn’t seen) and when Steve looked back at her she was readin’ the paper like a forty-year-old mom.

“Oh, my god, you don’t like it, you don’t gotta fucking stay here,” Bill went off, grumbling like a kid.

Bev gave him a brilliant smile — Steve thought she was really cute like Dust and the guys said. Way, way too young though, and anyway Steve liked blondes. “I’m not staying, some of us have to work,” she said; Bill rolled his eyes.

She took her keys and her little backpack from the coffee table (girls had so many purses and backpacks). “See you guys at school. Steve, see you on Wednesday, I guess.” She threw her arms out like a little nut. “ROLLERWORLD!” she said.

“ROLLERWORLD!” said Max and Billy; Steve’s ear rung from Bill screaming.

“Jesus,” he said.

By the time Wednesday rolled around and it was time to go to the skating rink, Steve was almost dreading it. Not really dreading it, exactly, but it’d be cool if he could just skip right over it. He’d been

at Bill's for a while yesterday and on Monday night, and just – the way that Billy and Max were goin' on about it made him feel almost nervous, which was totally dumb. He really couldn't skate that well; he hoped Bill wasn't serious about goin' around with him or whatever. Well they couldn't really do that shit in public anyway, he figured.

The Monster Squad was excited about it too. Dustin had even called him at work today on his lunch break to talk about what they were going to wear.

Steve said he didn't think that it really mattered. Dust said it definitely mattered because they both had dates for once.

"Yeah, I don't think, I really wouldn't call this thing a date," Steve told him.

"Oh really? Say that to Billy," Dustin said with the heavy foreboding of one who had had study hall with Bill for a year and hung up on him. Steve stared at the phone in terror.

Joanne was walking by with a huge stack of file folders; she paused looking at his face. "Are you okay, Steve?"

"Great," he said.

No one else was home like usual when Steve got there after work. Luke and Leia were happy to see him for once and they followed him around for a while.

It looked like Mom had been home and left already. She'd cleaned the kitchen up and he'd been planning to do that. He looked around to see if she'd left him any of her cute little passive-aggressive notes but he guessed she hadn't been amusing herself too much today.

He got changed and called Bill up. He didn't know if they were all gonna meet at the place or what. He wouldn't mind going and getting Billy and Max but he might have to pick up Dustin too.

"Yeah, that's too many fuckin' kids in the car for me," Bill said on the phone. "We can just meet there if you want, I gotta get the girls ready. Jane got a new dress."

He sounded all jovial and shit; Steve almost couldn't believe that *I gotta get the girls ready* was a sentence that'd come out of Billy Hargrove's mouth. He was obviously in Bizarro Land again. "Did you ... get her a dress?"

"Nah. Took 'em to the thrift store."

"Oh. Okay." It was still too weird. "Yeah, so I'll just see you at like seven."

"Okay, you ready for me?"

"Uh, I'm not sure," Steve told him in terror; Billy laughed like an evil maniac and hung up.

He called Dustin up too and Dust said he guessed he wanted a ride. He was in some big mood because his girlfriend Rebecca was only allowed out until nine o'clock. He said he'd probably catch a ride home later with Mike's parents.

Steve said okay. He got into his car and went to meet his fate (and to pick up Dust).

The roller rink was out past Loch Nora and it hadn't always been called Rollerworld; Steve couldn't remember the name it'd been called back when he was in middle school. You could tell that the outside had been redone and the parking lot had been paved over all nice too.

Dustin hadn't stopped talking for the whole ride there and he yipped and yapped the whole way across the parking lot too. "My mom wanted to come, you're really lucky I convinced her to stay home and watch the *Matlock* marathon," Dust told him — Steve kinda wished that was what he was doin' too. "I told her that you couldn't skate and she said she'd come and sit with you!"

Jesus. Steve guessed he really had dodged a bullet. He could just imagine himself hangin' out with Mrs Henderson and her knitting. The kids would definitely call him *Mr. Mom* until the end of time.

"Okay, I can frickin' skate," he said. Dustin gave him a really annoying grin.

Inside the place was pretty nice. There were more people there than Steve'd expected for a Wednesday but then again it had just opened up again. The lights were kinda dim and they had some big flashing ones over the actual rink; it was bigger than Steve remembered. There was a little arcade off towards the back that hadn't been there when he was a kid. The cafeteria definitely appealed to both him and to Dustin but they had to go and get their skates first.

Phil Collins was playing over the speaker and the lady at the desk told Steve they didn't have any roller-skates in a size thirteen. They had like two pairs but they'd been rented out already. "We can call you over the loudspeaker if they become available," the girl told him.

"Oh, my god, please, Steve," Dustin said in thrall from where he was sitting on the ground and putting his skates on; his favorite pastime was Steve looking like a total dork.

Steve ignored him. "That's okay," he said. He tried to look deeply mournful. "Guess I can't skate."

Dust actually did look deeply mournful. "What are you going to do all night, can you fit into a twelve?"

"Probably, maybe later."

Dustin fixed his baseball cap and gave the poor chick at the counter a big look. "This is discriminatory against large-footed men," he said. "How can you work in an establishment that doesn't cater to well-endowed –"

"Okay, okay, okay," Steve said in horror. "Take your damn hat off." He grabbed Dust by the back of his hoodie and started dragging him off through the crowd towards the tables; he could already see Max's bright braid and Will's unfortunate bowl cut. It was way easier to drag Dustin around while he was on a pair of skates.

"STEVE, YOU'RE NOT FUNNY!" Dustin said as Steve pulled him along.

The Monster Squad was at one of the big tables near the rink; Lucas already had a soda and fries. Everyone was there aside from El and

Billy. "Hey, have you been here long?" Steve asked Max.

"Not really. Hopper gave us a ride in his Jeep."

"Oh." Steve took a moment to think about how awkward that ride over must have been. "Uh, right."

"Billy's around here somewhere, he found one of his stupid girlfriends from school already," Max told him.

That was so great. Well, Steve guessed it didn't really matter. It was stupid to be jealous at the roller rink when he didn't even have any skates. At least Bill could go around with somebody.

He looked over at the kids. Dustin had started to eat Lucas's fries and was gettin' yelled at over it. Will looked a little unsteady on his roller skates; Steve thought he might have an ally. Mike was – Jesus. Mike was wearing about the ugliest sports coat that Steve'd ever seen in his life. It was blue-and-brown with green checkers on it, and a little big for him. He had one of his usual unhappy expressions on, gazing out at the skating rink.

"Mike, what the hell are you wearin'?" Steve asked him.

Mike turned towards him and made another great face. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Uhh," Steve said and laughed.

Lucas laughed too. "Tell him, Mike!"

"Shut up!" Mike snapped. He looked back at Steve. "Don't laugh, okay?"

Steve managed not to make a comment. He was already kinda laughing though.

Mike huffed out a sigh. "Look, so El's never really been to a skating place with other kids around. She thought this was, like, a date – you know, like a dance at school – and thought we should dress up, I just said okay so she'd have a good time."

Oh. "Oh," Steve said. "That's actually really cool, man."

The kid almost smiled at him. "Did you see her when you guys came in?"

"No, sorry."

"She was just with Billy," Max said. She was eating Lucas's fries now too (and not getting screamed at for it).

Mike looked like a cat getting its tail pulled. "Oh! That's great!" he said dramatically. "I'm gonna go find her." He pushed himself awkwardly off the side of the bench and careened unsteadily away, holding onto some of the other tables as he went. Then he turned around and wobbled back. "Sorry, I keep forgetting," he said. He looked over at Steve. "Nancy told me that she wants you to call her, she's been really annoying about it."

"Oh. Uh, yeah, okay," Steve said. "What's she want?"

Mike made a face like Steve was an idiot. "I didn't ask her!" He struggled off again.

Max was giving him a big look. "*Don't* call her," she advised.

Steve gave her a look back and didn't answer her. He felt kinda bad – Nancy had been cool and all with him lately. He didn't know how most girls would react to findin' out their ex-boyfriend liked a guy. She'd even called him a couple times before and he'd dropped the ball with her now that Billy was back. She probably wanted more gay details or something.

Now Max was giving him a new big look. "Where's your skates?" she demanded.

"Oh." Steve looked down like a dope. Max wasn't wearing the ugly brown-or-white skates that the place had; hers were kinda shiny and a faded yellow. She and Bill had probably brought theirs from home. "They didn't have my size, I'm so upset."

"It's discrimination," Dust said. He'd found Rebecca and was falling down tryin' to keep his arm around her. She was eating the last of

Lucas's fries. Lucas watched her with a resigned look on his face.

"That's not going to help you, Billy is still going to make you skate with him," Max told Steve.

"Yeah, that's okay."

The kids split up; Max and Will wanted to go skate and Lucas wanted more food. Dustin and his girl were already out on the rink. Steve told Lucas he'd get him something – he kind of felt like a prick for shovin' him around the other week – and wandered off to the cafeteria. He ordered some stuff and leaned on the counter waiting.

He saw Bill at the same time that Billy saw him. Billy grinned like a shark and headed over. Steve kind of felt like a lamb that was about to get slaughtered or something. Like in a sexy way because Billy looked really hot. He was just wearing a red t-shirt and his ripped-up jeans but he looked really hot. His skates were red too.

Bill skated over to him; he looked really happy and he had his arm around his best buddy Angela Davis. Steve knew her a bit because she lived down the street from him and she was kind of friends with Nancy. He'd always thought she was cool but she could go away right now. Her brown hair was teased out real big and she was wearing a little skirt and those slouchy socks that all the girls were into right now.

"Hey Steve!" she said. "I didn't know you'd be here. I need a soda. Give me a push," she told Billy; he put his hands on her shoulders and sent her off down to the other end of the counter.

Bill gave him a real nice smile. "Hey man," he said. Then he stopped smiling. "Where's your skates at?"

It was the question of the night. "They didn't have my size, I'll get a pair later."

Bill leaned on the counter too and looked doubtful. "Feels like you're tryin' to get out of skating with me," he said. "It ain't gonna work."

"Yeah, I said I'll skate with you. You been here long?"

“Like twenty minutes. You see Wheeler’s fucking outfit?”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, he looks really great. Did you want me to dress up like that?”

“You look okay.” Bill was giving him a big look. “You gonna take me home later?”

“Sure, if you want.”

Bill just looked at him some more. He looked like he wanted to say something else. Then he straightened up and his expression changed; he actually looked scared. He was looking at something over Steve’s shoulder. “ *Shit,* ” he said.

“Uh, what?”

“Nothin’!” Bill said. He pushed himself up off the counter. “Hey, I’m gonna go find Angie, see you at the table.”

“Okay, are you – “

Bill clapped him on the shoulder and skated off. Steve stared after him.

“BILLY!” someone said from behind him and Steve almost spilled his soda. Bill skated off even faster.

Steve turned around. It was Susan and she looked annoyed. She was also wearing roller skates; Steve kind of felt like he was in Bizarro Land again. “Oh, I’m sorry. Hi Steve.”

“Hey,” Steve managed.

“Billy’s been ignoring me all night so far, he thinks he can just do whatever he wants,” Susan grouched. “You know he’s not supposed to overdo it, he’s going to hurt his arm gliding around like a fool.”

“I think he’ll be okay.”

“Oh, do you?” she huffed. “That’s nice. Well, you can deal with him later when he’s crying his head off that his arm hurts like dramatic

baby, I know how he gets.”

Geez it was too adorable. She was kind of amusing him; she looked pretty pissed off so Steve tried not to smile. “What, uh, what’re you doing here?”

“Oh, I don’t look like I enjoy rollerskating?” Susan asked him and then smiled. “I just wanted to come by and see Maxine for a little while, she’s barely been home.”

Oh. Steve felt kind of guilty. “Yeah, she really likes it at Bill’s place.”

“Yes, I’m sure I can imagine what she likes about it,” Susan said dryly. Holy crap he hoped she didn’t know about the pot. “Okay, Steve, I’ll leave you alone. I’ve got Mrs. Wheeler here with me. Tell Billy to slow down, all right?”

“Can do,” said Steve, then felt like a nerd for saying *can do* . He watched Susan skate off; she was actually pretty good.

Back at the table he hung out with Lucas for a while. They didn’t have too much to talk about but Steve guessed that was all right.

Lucas said thanks for the new soda and fries. “You are *so lucky* they didn’t have skates in your size,” he said.

“I dunno if that’s gonna help me later,” Steve told him. Then he didn’t know what to say again. “Bill still gave you a ride to school?” It’d been the last day for the kids. He was pretty sure Billy had graduation practice for the rest of the week though.

“Yeah, he’s been okay.”

“What, what do you guys talk about?”

“You, mostly,” Lucas said sweetly; Steve gave him a look. “I don’t know, nothing really. Mostly we talk about cool music and *Black Panther*. ”

“Oh.” He didn’t really know too much about either of those things, apparently. He thought his music was cool but certain people might say otherwise.

Lucas was looking over his shoulder. "Speak of the devil, the devil appears," he said drolly.

Billy was skating over with Eleven in tow. She had her hair in a fancy braid too and she was wearin' a pink dress with flappy sleeves and a puffy skirt. It had some yellow on it too. She and Mike'd look like a demented birthday cake together.

Steve slid over on the bench to make room for them; Bill crashed down at the table next to him. He gripped Steve's arm for a second. "Hey. Sorry I ran out on you."

"That's okay. I'm supposed to tell you to slow down, your stepmom's really mad."

Billy laughed like that was funny. "She's almost fuckin' scary on skates," he said. "I'm good."

"Okay," Steve said. El looked a little sweaty so he pushed his soda over to her.

"Thank you," she said in her small voice. She sipped at the straw in this real delicate way and wiped her brow. She stared at him the whole time which was weird but he was getting used to it. "Did you see me and Billy skate?"

"Uh, no, I missed that."

"We did a figure eight and he picked me up."

"Was that Pat Benatar song," Bill put in.

"That is so beautiful," Lucas said.

Billy winked at him. "You're next, kiddo." Lucas made a great face and Billy grinned. "They ever gonna play any fuckin' rock music?"

"Maybe after ten, but I doubt it," Steve said. He kept looking at Billy and the different lights moving on his face. "You do skate really good, I didn't know." He was probably a great dancer too.

Billy took the soda from El and slurped it down. "Yeah, you should

see me on ice,” he said; Lucas choked on his soda and started coughing. ”What?”

“Nothing,” Lucas managed. He pounded on his chest with a fist and calmed himself down.

Steve turned to El, who was still watching him. “Hey, I didn’t know you knew how to skate too.”

“Jim took me four times.”

“Oh,” said Steve. Everyone was quiet for a few seconds at the terrifying image of Hop on skates. What if he fell and one of his guns went off.

Max was zooming over with Mike and Bev in tow so the kids got up again; Bill gave Steve another big look but didn’t yell about him not having skates yet.

Steve sat around for another hour or so. It wasn’t too bad since the kids kept taking breaks and talking to him and Bill kept coming over and talking to him. He looked like he was having a really fun time which was nice to see. Steve’d take him skating every week if it meant he got to see Billy laughing and acting like a nutcase.

Angela Davis came over and sat with him for a while and Steve decided she was cool again. Out on the rink ‘Heaven Is A Place On Earth’ by Belinda something was playing; Max and Billy were skating together in a big loop. Max was skatin’ backwards talking to him and whatever she said made Billy throw his head back and laugh. Bill skated by and winked at him and Steve felt his face heat up like a nerd.

You fucking idiot, he yelled at himself in his head. *You total moron. Why did you say the no-sex thing?*

The song ended and the speakers crackled as the intercom came on. “STEVE HARRINGTON, WE HAVE YOUR ROLLER SKATES,” said the girl from the desk; Steve sensed Dustin somewhere being a nefarious little shithead.

He went up and got his skates finally, then wobbled back over to the

table. Geez it was even worse now that he wasn't a kid anymore. He was totally going to fall on his face. He could sense it.

By the time he got back over to the table a new song was playing; it was some T Rex song but he didn't know the name of it. Susan was sittin' at the big bench with Bev and Will now. They watched the rest of the kids skate around – Max had found Lucas and they were all coupled up. They waved at Susan and she waved back.

Bill was skatin' by again and he had Mike with a steel grip on his arm. Mike was making a face like he was going to throw up. "YOU'RE GOING TOO FAST, I'M GOING TO DIE!" he said.

"HAHAHA!" Billy said.

Susan jumped up like lightning; Steve could tell when a mom had been waiting to yell. "BILLY HARGROVE!" she went the hell off. "YOU ARE GOING TO PULL YOUR STITCHES DOING THAT, YOU LET THAT BOY GO, *RIGHT NOW!* "

Billy glared for a second and then grinned like a madman. "OKAY, SUE!" he said. He sped up for a couple seconds and then swung his arm out and let Mike go.

"AUGH!" yelled Mike. He careened forward and smashed into the Plexiglass in front of them. He looked like a smushed bug; Will started laughing a lot.

Susan sat down again and tapped her foot in an annoyed way. "*Honestly,* " she said.

The kids skated and skated. Steve wobbled back and forth from the table getting food. Bill kept comin' over and puttin' his arm on him and stuff, making him feel all flustered. It was totally stupid. A Clash song came on and Billy yelled like a nut and dragged Will off.

Once eleven o'clock hit the lights dimmed even more and they started playing some slow songs. Mike and El finally found each other and had some beautiful moments skating together to a Cyndi Lauper song and then a soap ad that played over the speakers. Dust was sitting next to Steve in a big sulk because Rebecca had left him all

alone; Will and his mom and his brother had taken off a couple minutes ago.

Bill skated back over with Max and they both collapsed at the table. Max looked happy too and her face was all red from skating around like a little nut. She stole Steve's Slush Puppie and slurped it down.

'Night Moves' by Bob Seger was playing over the loudspeakers; Bill put his head in his hands and gave Max a big look.

She quirked her head at him for a second. "What?" she said; Billy raised his eyebrows. She started laughing and made a weird motion with her hands. Her braid was coming undone. "Oh, crap. Tracey bursts through the wall and makes you skate to this."

Billy laughed too. "Like a fuckin' disco ball comes down from the ceiling."

Steve guessed they had some kinda big joke about this song. All he got from it was that Billy's old girlfriend had obviously liked great music too. 'Night Moves' was the best.

Dustin leaned on the table and looked serious. "Was Tracey a man?" he asked covertly.

Everyone stared at him. Max kicked him under the table hard and Billy looked like he wanted to. "No, she was a fuckin' girl, you dickbag," he said.

"Okay, okay, okay!" Dustin said; Max kicked him again. "OW, ARE YOU SERIOUS! IT'S A GENDER-NEUTRAL NAME!"

Bill still looked like he wanted to kick him but a new song came on and he decided to stop bein' pissed off. "You wanna go again?" he asked Max.

"Okay." She jumped up and gave Steve his (mostly empty now) slushie back to him.

"Next's you and me," Bill told him, leaning over.

"What, are you serious?" Steve asked. "You really wanna do that

here?”

“Why not?” Bill was staring at him and it made him feel so weird. Billy was acting so different about everything from – well, from how he had been before. It was weird to have him go from not even wanting to tell Max about them to, like, wanting to skate around with him or whatever. That was couples’ shit, and Steve couldn’t even skate good. It kind of felt like it was a ... joke or something.

Steve wasn’t answering him; Billy stretched across the table and pointed. “Look, there’s two guys skatin’ right there.”

Steve followed his gaze out to the rink and then rolled his eyes. “Bill, those are Angela’s little brothers, and they’re like nine.”

“So what?” Billy said.

He couldn’t help but laugh a little. “How do you not know who they are, didn’t you just meet them?”

“Whatever. All little kids look the same to me.” Bill was standing up again. He gave Steve a big look. “I’m not joking,” he said. He and Max headed off to skate to ‘Moonlight Mile.’

The rest of the kids came thundering back; Mike looked really sweaty in his sports coat. El seemed tired so Steve wobbled off to get her another soda. When he sat back down Bill was skatin’ by and he winked at Steve again.

Dustin looked taken aback. “Uh, Billy just winked at me,” he said; Steve sighed.

“Yeah, bozo, I don’t think that was for you,” Lucas told him.

“OH!” said Dust. Jesus.

The song ended and a new one came back on. Max and Billy came back over. Max skated around behind him and clamped her hands down on Steve’s shoulders.

“Hey, get off me,” Steve said.

“I can’t.”

“Okay, I’m serious, get up,” Billy told him. “Thought you were gonna skate with me.”

“What, to this?” It was ‘These Dreams’ by Heart.

Billy looked really offended. “S’wrong with it?”

“Nothing, it’s a great song,” Steve said right away. Bill was all into chick rock or whatever; it was another weird thing about him. “This is like five minutes long or whatever.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna go with me for more than one, I been waiting all night,” Bill said; Steve stared at him. “What?”

“You really wanna do that?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fun,” Bill told him. “Come on. I’m gonna go real slow with you, I’ll show you what to do.”

Jesus H. He made everything sound really sexual. Steve stared at him some more.

Bill stared back at him. “What?”

“Nothing, I – “ His voice almost cracked. “Okay, fine, I’ll skate with you.”

Billy broke out in a huge grin which made him feel okay. “Max, get the prep outta the booth.” Max started shoving him so he’d get up.

Steve wobbled over to the rink; he really did almost fall over so Billy had to hold his arm. Max skated along in front of them so it wouldn’t look too gay or whatever. She was skating backwards like a little show-off and she gave Steve a thumbs up. “You’re doing really good, Steve!” she said encouragingly.

“Yeah, thanks,” Steve grumbled.

“Okay?” Bill asked him.

“Yeah, I think so,” Steve said. Billy let go of his arm and he almost hit the Plexiglass. “NOPE, NOT OKAY.” Bill laughed and grabbed his shoulder again.

It was kind of nice even though Steve definitely wished he had the skates with the bumpers on them. He almost felt all romantic or whatever.

It felt like they were out there for a long time. They skated to ‘These Dreams’ by Heart and then they skated to ‘Hold on Loosely’ by 38 Special. They skated to ‘Unsatisfied’ by The Replacements and then the lights came on which meant it was midnight and they had to get off the rink.

Back at the table Lucas and Mike and Dustin were all staring at them. Max got her huge scowl on her face. “WHAT?” she said.

“Nothing!” yelled all the guys.

Max sat down again, still scowling. She started eating Lucas’s fourth batch of fries; they were probably cold by now.

The place closed at twelve-thirty so everyone headed outside with the rest of the stragglers. Max dug around in her huge backpack that Steve somehow hadn’t even seen all night and handed Billy his ratty Converse. He sat down and put his sneakers on while the rest of the kids said goodbye to eat other.

Dust said goodbye to Steve and then he headed off with Mike and his folks. El talked to Max and Billy for a long time and then she set off down the long parking lot towards Hopper’s Jeep. He was standing leaning against the hood and smoking; he looked a little grouchy like he usually did. He put his arm around her when she reached him and helped her up into the car.

“He didn’t wanna come in and skate?” Steve said; Max laughed really loud.

Max still had her yellow skates on and she and Billy were sharing another Slush Puppie. They were gonna be totally amped up all night. “I want McDonald’s,” she said like a kid.

“You got stuff to eat at home,” Billy told her.

They headed across the emptying parking lot to Steve’s car. “MY LEGS HURT,” Max went off. She and Bill stretched his hoodie between them and Bill pulled her along on her skates. “Steve, can we get another slushy?”

Everyone got into the car and Steve turned the key in the ignition. Max was crashed out in the backseat. He could tell Bill was staring at him and it made him feel all hot and stupid. Depeche Mode was on the radio playing ‘Just Can’t Get Enough’ on POWER 99 and Steve was waiting for him to make a comment. He started backing up the car to pull out of the parking space.

Bill put his hand on his arm. “Steve,” he said, real close to his face.

Steve turned his head and almost screamed; Billy was about four inches away from him and he had a huge demonic grin on his face. He felt this real true terror that Billy was always joking about. “What, what d’you want?”

Bill made his eyes look real big and just stared at him. He looked all serious, like he had a big secret to tell. “I ain’t know they wrote songs about you and put ‘em on the radio,” he said, then started grinning again.

Jesus Christ. Steve’s face felt hot again; he was glad it was dark in the car. He almost drove over a speed bump. “Okay, shut up,” he managed to say.

“What?” Billy said.

“Billy, that was really good!” Max said happily from the backseat.

“Thanks, I know.”

“You’re such a moron, were you just – what, like drinking all night?” Steve asked him.

“Yeah, soda,” Billy said like a dork. Jesus. He looked real pleased with himself. Steve rolled his eyes; he was pretty sure he was smiling though.

They stopped and got Max her McDonald's anyway – Steve hadn't let her use her money at Walmart so she was still flush with cash – and headed back to Bill's place. Steve didn't know if he was gonna stay over but he said he'd come in for a minute.

In the apartment Bill collapsed down on his bed, not in a sexy way. He kicked his Converse off. "MY FUCKIN' ARM HURTS," he went off like a dramatic baby.

Steve laughed. He sat down beside him, just for a while.

Friday Steve got to leave work early at three. It'd been kind of a long week. Todd had been out for three days with the flu and he was the only guy worth talking to in the office. Craig said sexist shit all the time and the other two guys were in their fifties and just talked about golf and probiotics all the day. They were nice and all, Steve guessed, but they were totally in their fifties.

Dad had been in twice yesterday – he was usually at the fancier building out in Oldsdale – so Steve'd got to see people kiss his ass all day. That was always fun. Dad'd even asked Linda if she was keeping Steve out of trouble which was so embarrassing.

She hadn't even looked up from typing on her little keyboard. "I wouldn't know what to do without Steven, he helps me so much."

That'd made him feel good, and it shut Dad up too. Linda was really an angel, like on a PBS special or something. Her birthday was in August – she said she was turning forty-six again – and he definitely needed to get her something awesome.

Anyway, it was weird to see his dad at the office and not at home. Before this year he'd usually still be around the house at least a couple days a week, not that Steve cared if he was there or not. He always told himself he'd be happier if Dad just left but he wasn't really that happy.

Steve's parents were real good at keeping up appearances. In middle school they'd sat together and smiled at all his baseball games and then fought the whole way home. Fake shit, Steve couldn't stand it – playing games or whatever. Then it kinda seemed like once he had graduated his dad had just stopped caring about what it looked like or what Steve might think. All through high school his parents had talked about how they were 'working things out' but they were never really around each other to work whatever things out that they needed to.

You couldn't really work out cheating on someone anyway. It was one thing Steve was pretty sure you couldn't work out. That was what his dad had done to his mom, and for a long time. Steve's dad was a total asshole. Mom never wanted to talk about it or whatever.

Steve didn't really feel like thinking about that though. Usually he could shut his mind off pretty easy if he didn't want to think about something – well, if it wasn't, like, two in the morning or whatever. Then sometimes he had to think about stuff. It's not like anybody wanted to hear about it, so it was easy to turn it off.

He told himself not to think about it. It was Friday and he didn't have a reason to get all annoyed. He wondered if work was just going to suck even more all the time now because it was summer and he'd rather be anywhere else. He was tired, too – he'd been out real late with Bill and Max at the roller rink on Wednesday and when he'd gone home he'd thought maybe he would actually sleep good for once. That hadn't happened and he'd just stared at the wall until six in the morning when he could get up. Now it was Friday and his sleep schedule was all messed up. He kinda felt like one of the fifty-year-old guys at his job.

He probably should have stayed over at Bill's place on Wednesday. Billy'd said he didn't mind but Steve still kinda felt weird staying over all the time, especially during the week or whatever. It was a stupid thing because Bill wouldn't have said stay over if he didn't mean it. He never really said stuff he didn't mean, aside from when he was pissed off.

That was the thing, Steve guessed. Billy hadn't really been pissed off lately. Steve thought that he had plenty reason to be pissed off so it

was weird that he wasn't.

It was like there were ... two Billys now or something. There was the Bill that had got in that big fight with him at the start of the month and then there was the new Billy that'd come back. Steve really liked the new nicer Billy but it was almost as if he was waiting for the other shoe to drop or something now.

It felt really shitty to feel that way though. It wasn't like he didn't think that Bill was a ... nice person or something. He could be nice. Really nice, secretly nice. It was one of the things that Steve liked about him. Bill wasn't nice to everyone so it made you feel special when he was. Steve didn't want to not feel special again.

Once he got home he let the dogs in and laid around on the couch. He was still thinkin' about Billy like he usually was. Bill said that he wanted to do something this weekend and that he'd call so Steve was waiting for him to call. He guessed usually he was the one who'd been calling or, really, he'd just been showing up at Bill's place, and maybe he shouldn't do that either.

He didn't know when Bill was gonna call – he hadn't seen him since Wednesday – and he was maybe kind of hangin' around in case he did. He could be out with Dustin at the diner or something; Alex had called and left a message said that he and some of the guys were going out to see that *Predator* movie tonight. Steve had definitely watched enough horror movies the last two weeks so he'd begged off when he'd called back.

Anyway he didn't mind being alone for a little while. He could have Steve-time. Steve-time usually included jacking off but not really in the living room so he went upstairs.

Steve had lots of stuff to think about and lots of stuff to jack off to especially since he and Billy still hadn't really hooked up again since that time like almost two weeks ago. He kept thinking about Billy and the way he'd looked last Sunday and all the stuff he'd said. Thought about him saying *I never told you I was queer* and how he'd acted when they were skatin' together on Wednesday and then after when they were in the car.

It was so weird to think about Bill being gay or whatever, even though Steve was maybe pretty dumb and shouldn't he have known that Bill was gay? He'd just always assumed that Billy liked both like he did. Or maybe it was some hippie California thing like they didn't like labels out there, or he was into that free love thing or something. Bill had like three tie-dye shirts; he was totally a hippie.

A gay hippie. Okay. It was weird because Billy had said he'd never done stuff with a guy before either. He didn't think Bill would lie or whatever. He thought about Billy looking at him saying *You're the only person I ever really liked like that* and it made him feel all hot and weird.

He couldn't really mean that. Maybe Steve was the only guy he'd ever hooked up with but he had to have had crushes before or whatever. Right?

It was just nuts; he couldn't stop thinking about it. *You're the only person I ever really wanted.* It was really hot. If Bill was gay he had to have thought about that stuff before. Like he wanted to have sex with guys or whatever. There was a lot of stuff they hadn't done yet; Steve wondered if Bill wanted to do it.

He knew about that other stuff but he hadn't really thought about it too much or anything. Okay maybe a little. Back when he'd been fourteen or fifteen – he thought he'd been fifteen – he'd gone on winter vacation to the mountains with his parents; it was the last vacation they'd ever taken together. Dad had just drank all the time and Mom had gone to the spa. Steve went skiing by himself four times. He'd basically had a cabin all to himself – most kids would probably have thought was super cool, but Steve thought it was lonely. In one of the bedrooms there'd been a bunch of tapes that whoever owned the place had left behind. One of them had been a porno from probably the seventies so of course Steve had watched it because he'd been fifteen.

It was a pretty normal porno and not one of the crazy, silly ones where they were all dressed up like pirates or whatever. Actually it'd been kind of romantic, really. There had been some scenes with a guy and a girl and then there had been a girl and a girl and then there'd been a scene with two guys. Steve hadn't really known they made

tapes like that before. Well he'd *known* but he'd never thought he'd, like, actually watch one.

He had watched it though, like three or four times. He told himself that he'd watch the guys as a joke but then it'd been kinda hot and he'd gotten really turned on. He jacked off a buncha times to that and then he'd thought about it like all summer trying to figure out if he was gay or something – now he thought about it in his head as the weird summer he was into dudes.

It was just something he'd never thought about before, two guys together. The blonde guy in it had been really hot. Finally he figured out he wasn't really gay but maybe he kind of liked to look at guys sometimes. It still seemed pretty weird and he hadn't really thought it needed to be a big deal or anything. He didn't think he'd ever really want to be with a dude like that, like not for real. But then Billy had moved to town and Steve thought that maybe he understood the tape.

So he knew that guys could have sex like that and stuff, because of the tape. Like anal sex or whatever. Guys could do that to other guys but a guy could do that to a girl too (Steve *guessed* – Nance would have punted him probably all the way into South Bend if he'd ever said the word *anal* to her). Probably a girl could do it to her guy too; they had all kinds of crazy stuff out there.

They'd done other stuff on the tape too that he and Bill hadn't really done and Steve was always thinking about it. Bill had to know about that stuff, right? He had to have thought about doing it to other guys. Maybe he wanted to do it to Steve. Maybe he wanted Steve to do it to him. It was like really hot to think about but it wasn't like they ever talked about it so Steve didn't know. *You're the only person I ever really wanted.*

Okay. It was definitely Steve-time; his hand was down his pants. He hoped that Luke or Leia wasn't going to bound in and spoil his mood. He bet that he and Bill could have a lot of fun if they got a little drunk together or something. Bill got all touchy-feely when he was drunk or high; he was real nice too. Steve bet –

The phone rang and he almost fell off his bed like in a cartoon. He

looked at the clock in his room and it was almost five. He'd been thinking his gay thoughts for longer than he'd realized. Bisexual thoughts? No, probably gay, since he was thinking of one specific hot blonde dude.

He was really horny and he almost didn't pick up the phone – it was probably gonna be his mom with some stupid story or something to kill his boner. But then he realized it was probably Billy, the object of his (gay) desire so he picked up.

“Hello?”

It was Bill. He said, “Hey,” and then didn't say anything else.

“Hey, what's up?” Steve took his hand out of his pants. Casual and collected was his middle name. It was a long one.

“Nothing,” Bill said. Then he didn't say anything else again.

He was making Steve feel kind of weird. He definitely sounded totally different than he had all Wednesday night. Kind of subdued. “Uh, you okay?”

“Sure,” Billy said. There was another long pause and Steve could hear someone talkin' in the background. “Thought you wanted me to call you.”

“Yeah, I did. Uh, are you at home?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Steve said. He felt kind of amused and kind of ... something else, too. Even talking to new nice Billy was kind of like talking to a brick wall sometimes. He waited a couple seconds. “Gonna tell me where you are?”

“Yeah, I –” there was another pause, the phone buzzed like Billy had put his hand over the receiver to talk to someone else. “Just at the hospital, so.”

“Uh, WHAT?” Steve said. He sat up on his bed. “What hap – are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Billy said quickly. “I gotta – uh, get my stitches taken out. Forgot it was today. So.”

Oh. Okay. “Oh. Okay,” Steve said. That was better than something bad happening again but it still made him feel freaked out. Jesus he was so frickin’ worried about Bill all the time now it seemed; he was like a mother goose or whatever. He felt all worked up in a minute. “Are you out in Hamilton again?”

“Yeah, they wanna check out my head and shit.”

That was like an hour away. “You shoulda told me, I’d have went with you.”

“Nah, I don’t want you to come all the way out here.”

“What, did you drive yourself?” Steve asked him. He was probably doing the Den Dad thing but he didn’t really care. Bill didn’t have a good dad anyway.

“Nah,” Bill said again. He said, “Hopper took me.”

Steve felt really surprised. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Sue was workin’, so.”

“Oh, okay.” Steve didn’t really know how it felt havin’ stitches taken out but he thought maybe Bill shouldn’t drive that far. So it was good that someone’d taken him. Then again – an hour in the car with Hop, he didn’t know. “So El’s with you guys?” he said since Bill seemed to be waiting for him to say something else.

“Oh. Yeah, she’s here.” There was another long pause; Steve was trying to think of what to say. Bill said, “Sorry, I just forgot. Dunno how long I gotta wait here, think I’m like next or something. I just, uh.” Another silence, the line buzzed a little. “Wanted to ... call you or whatever.”

He made Steve feel all gushy and crap. “Yeah, thanks,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“Sure.” The line buzzed again. Finally Bill said, “Sucks here.”

“Yeah, I bet. I, I woulda came with you.”

“S’okay.”

“Okay, uh. Do you still wanna do something later? I mean – ”

“If you want.” He sounded even weirder.

“You don’t – “

“Pro’lly be back by like eight or nine,” Billy interrupted him. “You can – I dunno if you wanna come over or somethin’. Don’t think I can do anything fun.”

“Yeah, no, sure,” Steve said. “No, I still – yeah, I’ll come over.”

“Okay.”

Okay. “Okay,” Steve said too. “So I’ll just – yeah, is Max gonna be or anything?”

“Nah, she’s with her moms. Uh. Got a key under the mat.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah, so. Bye.” Bill hung up on him.

Okay, again.

Steve hung up too and sat looking at the phone. Probably shouldn’t jerk off thinkin’ about Billy when he was all sad in the hospital out in Hamilton. He felt bad and he wished he’d known so that he could’ve went there with him. Or maybe Bill hadn’t wanted him there. He had said he’d forgot though. Bill wasn’t an obsessive freak like Steve; he forgot stuff sometimes. It was nice that Bill had thought to call him. It made Steve feel all stupid again, even though he still felt bad thinking about Bill being in the hospital.

At least he had El there. She could probably float some stuff around and make him real happy in a couple seconds.

Steve got up and felt all stupid about Billy. It was like when you first

got a crush on somebody or something; he still felt like that and it'd been a couple of months already.

He took a shower, feeling stupid about Billy, and tried to make his hair look nice. It was still a Friday night, even if they weren't goin' on a fancy date or something. He wondered if he should wait to eat with Bill but then decided he could totally do second-dinner if Bill wanted to get something.

He ate his raviolis (cold, which was the best way to eat raviolis) and talked to the dogs. They were the only other reason why he felt bad about being at Bill's all the time. He never knew when his mom would be home and he felt shitty ignoring them. Bill had said he could bring Luke and Leia over to his place but Steve kinda felt like that was a disaster waiting to happen.

In the living room, he watched the news for a while; apparently there had been another little earthquake in town yesterday that no one'd felt the need to mention to him. It made him feel too freaked out and he didn't know why that was happening. Probably because he was finally happy or whatever. The whole goddamn town was gonna cave in if he ever got to third base with Bills again.

Okay he didn't need to think about sex all the time. He could be supportive boyfriend Steve and just hang out with Bill if he didn't feel too hot or whatever.

They could have sex if Bill wanted to though. Maybe he'd be over 'respecting' Steve by now. God Billy thought he was too fucking funny.

At a little past eight he let the dogs out for the night and headed over to Billy's place. He figured he could sit around and wait if Bill wasn't back yet. He saw the kids' bikes in front of the diner and thought about stopping in, but then decided not to. Mostly he just wanted to see Billy.

Bill's crushed-up car was parked out on the side-street. That didn't really mean anything since he'd said that Hop had driven him earlier; Steve parked behind him and headed up. He knocked on the door and when no one answered he found the key under the mat.

When he opened up the door the first thing that he noticed was the place looked real different – it almost freaked him out for a moment. Then he realized that someone had just been cleaning. The couches were pushed back and it looked like someone had actually vacuumed.

The light was on in the little kitchen. Bill was there putting dishes away; he dropped the Donald Duck mug in the sink when he saw Steve.

“Hey, sorry.” Steve closed the door. “Uh, didn’t you hear me knock?”

Billy stared at him and put the cup away. “Must’ve not been payin’ attention.”

“Oh. Okay. When did you get back?”

“Seven or something. They took me back like right after I called ya.”

“Oh,” Steve said again. He looked around. “Uh, what are you doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?”

Steve wondered if he was in a mood. “Okay, I guess I mean – why?”

“What, I can’t clean my place?” Bill was putting the dishes away. Steve came over and leaned against the back of the counter; holy crap he’d even cleaned the sink out and shit. “Max’s mom wants to come over here this weekend, I don’t want her to think we live in a fucking shithole. Might not let her come over anymore or somethin’.”

“Uh, okay. She wouldn’t do that,” Steve told him. He went around the counter and stood by the dishwasher. He handed Bill a plate from it and Bill took it.

“I just felt like doin’ it.”

“Okay, well. I’d have helped you.”

Billy made a face; he looked really tired. He was wearing one of his Led Zeppelin shirts with the sleeves cut off. You could see the scar twisting out over his shoulder. It wasn’t that ugly anymore. “Yeah, that’s okay.”

“El’s not here?”

“Nah. Wanted to be with her old man for once.”

It was dumb but he didn’t like Billy being by himself. “You could have called me again.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s okay,” Bill said again. His mouth twisted to the side. “I don’t want to be all ... clingy or whatever.”

Steve leaned on the counter. “I love clingy, I can handle clingy. By all means, go for it.”

Bill snorted and closed up the dishwasher. He wasn’t really looking at Steve. “Quit doin’ your cute shit for like a minute, I’m almost done.”

“Uh, I’m not doing my cute shit,” Steve informed him. “I *am* cute.”

“Yeah, I know that.” It was funny; both Max and Billy made the same kinda face when they were tryin’ not to smile. He started to move past Steve. “I just gotta vacuum.”

Steve caught his arm, not the one that’d gotten messed up. “Uh, didn’t you already do that?”

Billy looked at him like he was dumb. “You gotta do it twice. My mom always did that it like that, says you get more stuff that way.”

“Oh. Okay.” Steve had no clue what to say to that. “Well, how about you just do it tomorrow? Or I’ll do it for you.”

“I got that class in the mornin’.” He was trying to slip away; Steve let him go.

“Are you okay?”

“Sure am.” Now Bill was folding up a blanket over the back of the couch and not-looking at him some more.

“Yeah, maybe you should, uh, slow down for a minute,” Steve told him; Bill stared at him. He almost looked a little mistrustful.

“Said I’m okay.”

“Sure, alright.” Steve sat down on the couch and looked up at him.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He kept staring at him. He didn’t want to make some huge deal out of it or make Bill get all pissed off. It was just that he looked really tired. “You know, it’s just me here. You could – uh, not be okay. It’s okay to ... not be okay in front of me.” That was a lot of ‘okays’; he probably sounded stupid.

Billy looked at him blankly. His mouth ticced to the side once. He looked weirdly small again just standing in the empty living room. “I’m just cleanin’ my place.”

“Yeah, but you – “ He obviously didn’t look okay. “Can you just sit down with me?”

“I guess.” Bill stared at him like a weird person for a couple more seconds and then he did sit down. “What you wanna do, you wanna watch TV or something?”

“Uh, whatever you want. Or I can clean up for you if you want.”

“Guess it doesn’t matter.” He gave Steve the remote so Steve turned the TV on. There was some old Western playing on channel three.

Steve put his arm around Billy; Bill kinda leaned into him so he stroked his hand down his arm a couple times. “How do you feel?” he asked him.

“Dunno. I’m tired,” Bill said. His voice was quieter than usual. “My arm feels weird.”

“Did it hurt to have the stitches taken out?”

“Mm. Not really. Just felt weird.” He didn’t say anything for a couple seconds. “I fuckin’ hate being in places like that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Bill didn't answer him. They watched the TV for a couple minutes, then Bill laid down and put his head in Steve's lap again. "Hey, thanks for comin' over here."

"Yeah, sure, I – " *There's no other place I'd rather be* sounded way too corny; Steve managed to stop himself. "I wanted to come over."

"We can hang out at your place more. Know it kind of sucks here or whatever."

Steve stared down at him and didn't say anything for a couple seconds. Bill was a crazy person; he loved being at Billy's apartment. It felt like a real place and not a, a museum or whatever, like the way his house sometimes felt. "No, I like your place."

"Okay."

Billy was quiet for a while, watching the TV. Steve finally gave in and put his hand in Bill's hair like he'd wanted to before; Bill closed his eyes. They sat like that for a long time, so long that Steve thought maybe Billy had fallen asleep.

Then he opened his eyes again. "Seen my dad today," he said suddenly.

"Oh." Everything made sense now. "What, where was he?"

"Just at home," Bill told him. "I had to go and get stuff. Needed like my birth certificate and shit for my class. I ain't remember my social security number."

"Dustin has a song to remember his with," Steve said; Billy made the almost-smiling face.

"Yeah, well, I'm not fuckin' creative like that."

"What happened with your dad? Did he start something with you?"

Billy didn't answer him at first; he turned his head and looked at the TV. Steve kinda thought maybe he wouldn't answer at all. Then he said, "No. Not really. Just fuckin' – I don't know." He chewed on his lip. "I was hopin' Susan would be home or whatever."

“Yeah, I don’t blame you.”

“I,” Billy said and stopped. He said, “You know, I ain’t seen my dad in like a month. He went out for like a week at the start of June and then I was, uh. Gone.”

“Yeah,” Steve said; his voice sounded tight. He kept on petting Billy’s hair.

“He ain’t even see me in the hospital or anything. I just, uh – forgot about seein’ him.” Bill kinda laughed. “I forgot I was fuckin’ scared of him.”

Jesus. Steve didn’t really know what to say; it felt like his heart was in his stomach. “You don’t have to see him anymore,” he said.

“Yeah. I guess not.”

“Is he goin’ to your graduation?”

Billy snorted. “Fuck no.”

God, Bill’s dad was such a prick. Well Steve’s dad was a prick but Billy’s dad was on a whole different level. Steve’d never been scared of his own dad or had any reason to be. Never had to worry about being hit or screamed at for no reason. It was just so much; he didn’t know how to say it to Billy. “Your dad’s a piece of shit.”

“Yeah, I dunno. I never really thought ‘bout it. I guess he probably would’ve. He and Susan are in this big fight about my money, he ain’t coming around.”

“Uh, what about your money?” Steve asked him.

“Nothin’. It don’t matter.” Bill looked up at him; his eyes were really blue. “Hey, are you comin’ to my stupid graduation?”

“Sure, if you want me to.”

“Max’s mom wants to have some dumb party at the house after.”

Steve smiled. “Is she cooking?” he asked; Billy made a face. “Yeah, I

totally want to go.”

“Okay. Cool.” They watched the TV some more. Bill took the blanket from the back of the couch and put it over them. He even let Steve hold his hand for a while.

Notes for the Chapter:

- Thanks to Amy for fixing all my mistakes. <3
- Don't worry, guys. Steve and Billy are going to hook up again in the next chapter! They are not going to wait til August.
- I still haven't replied to a lot of comments and I'm so sorry! Part of why I like posting fic is because I love to discuss characters, storylines, queerness, and writing. I really appreciate every single comment I get; each one fuels me to write more, lol. I don't really get to connect with a lot of people who are into fandom anymore SO reading your comments and getting to interact with you guys and talk about gayer stranger things is about my favorite thing. I've been busy recently but I will reply to everything, likely over the weekend. Thanks so much for reading, as always. <3

8. Chapter Eight

Summary for the Chapter:

“You don't wanna go out with me?” Steve asked him innocently. “You said you'd do whatever I want.”

“That's low, man.” Bill narrowed his eyes.

“Lemme take you out.”

“What, like to a dance club?”

“If that's what you want,” Steve said. Billy looked actually terrified – he was so fun.

Chapter Eight

They didn't get to be alone for very long – it was only past ten when the apartment door flung open. It hit against the side of the wall with an impressive thudding sound.

Billy sat up, startled, but it was just Max. She thundered around behind them into the kitchen and threw something down onto the little table, then stomped over and stood blocking the TV. She had a great big scowl on her face.

Steve felt scared. “Hey, Max.”

Max ignored him; she was glaring at Billy. “WHY'D YOU LIE TO ME EARLIER?” she went off.

Bill settled back down against Steve's shoulder. “What you talking about?”

“Uh, when I called earlier and asked what was up, you said nothing, WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME YOU WERE AT THE HOSPITAL? HI,

STEVE,” she added angrily.

“I wasn’t *at* the hospital when you called me,” Bill told her in this patient voice; Max scowled even more at it.

“You still could have told me!”

“Yeah, I don’t need a fuckin’ babysitter.”

“Don’t you?” Max seethed. In the light of the TV she honestly looked pretty scary. “Well, at least *Steve* is here. Mom told me you went back to Hamilton, I would have come with you!”

“Jesus, it’s not a big deal.” Billy kinda had the overwhelmed look on his face again; Steve felt like telling Max not to yell at him right now. “What you doing, did you walk over here?”

Max gave him a weird look and didn’t answer for a second. She looked like she was waiting for the punchline or something. Bill just looked at her too and finally she said, “No, I – Mom picked me up after work.”

She glanced around and looked surprised, like she was just now realizing that she’d stormed into Bill’s place all in a rage like a crazy person. “Oh. Are you guys, like, on a date or something?” Billy sighed.

“Uh. Not really,” Steve said. He guessed it wasn’t a real date or whatever. They were just watching the TV.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“You’re blockin’ the movie,” Bill told her.

Max huffed again and moved over a few inches (she was still mostly blocking the TV). “So can I stay here, or do you want me to go?”

“I don’t care what you do,” Bill reminded her.

She made a face. “Oh, well, I guess you don’t care about the *pizza* I just brought over for you either!”

“Okay, hang on,” Bill said right away. “I ain’t mean it like that.” He was so easy.

Max went and turned the light on in the kitchen, then brought the pizza box over to coffee table. It was a white pizza because she and Bill were huge hippies.

Steve picked the broccoli off and ate two slices anyway. He guessed it was time for second-dinner. If he had Luke and Leia here they could get their veggies. Broccoli was okay and all but not on pizza, especially when the pizza had no sauce. It was a travesty really.

“Steve, you’re such a baby,” Max told him. She was crashed out on the smaller couch and chewing with her mouth open.

“Vegetables don’t belong on pizza, you guys are fuckin’ weird.”

“Okay, what about, like, peppers?” Steve made a face. “Mushrooms?” Steve made a worse face even though he could do mushrooms. Max was so funny. “God, you’re worse than Billy. He’s so picky.”

“I ain’t picky,” Bill said like a kid. He tossed her the remote. “I’m traumatized from your mom feedin’ me for five years.”

Max rolled her eyes. Steve guessed she didn’t have anything to say to that. Really he didn’t think that Susan’s cooking was as bad as Max and Bill went on about; Steve’d had way worse. Susan worked all the time and she was still around to make dinner. He thought it was nice that she did that.

The western that they’d been watching ended and Max put MTV on so they could watch *Headbanger’s Ball* together. No one really talked for a couple minutes. Steve’d kinda thought he’d actually get Bill alone for once.

It was just Max, though, and Billy didn’t seem to mind her being there. He was still half-laying on Steve so that was something. It was definitely more than he’d gotten before.

Max was in some kinda mood; Steve could tell from the way she kept glaring at the TV, even when Metallica came on. He hoped she wasn’t on her period or something. During a commercial Bill sat up a little

and asked her, “What, you really ticked off at me? Why you keep makin’ faces?”

“I’m NOT making faces,” Max snapped. She made another face. “My *dad* called me when I was at the house.”

“Oh yeah, what he want? Talkin’ shit about your moms again?” You could tell by the look on Bill’s face exactly what he thought about Max’s real dad – it was kinda weird to see. Steve’d never really thought about Max having a family outside of Billy and her mom and Bill’s dad. Of course she did; it made him feel kind of dumb. Aside from Dustin, Steve guessed she was the only kid he knew who had divorced parents. Oh. Will too. He felt dumber.

“No. I have to go and see him in like two weeks.” She looked super bummed about it.

“Thought you was dyin’ to get back to Cali.”

Max shrugged all moody. “Not really.”

“All I fuckin’ heard for about three months since your birthday.”

“Yeah, but – Dad’s got some dumb new girlfriend now, he talked about her for ten minutes.”

Bill dug around in his jeans pocket and pulled out his pack of Camels. He smacked at Steve’s knee so Steve gave him his lighter. “Flight attendant chick?”

“No, some new girl already!” Max looked even more glum. “I don’t even want to go anymore. I *don’t* even want to go, they’re just going to ignore me the whole time. You know Alyssa moved away too?” Steve didn’t know who that was but she was givin’ Bill a big look. “She moved to *Santa Monica*. In the *hills*.”

“Yeah? Good riddance,” Bill said; Max made her goldfish face. He looked over at Steve. “That bitch sold her out.”

“No she *didn’t*!” Max yelped. “That was like my last friend back home, I’m going to be bored as shit for *eight days*.” The horror. She frowned hugely and crossed her arms. “Lucas is probably going to

forget all about me.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Steve told her; she just rolled her eyes again. “When are you going?”

“I have a flight for like the week after fourth of July.”

“Hey, that’s not bad. We can still do tons of stuff before then.”

Max didn’t look heartened. “It’s going to totally *suck*.”

“Don’t worry, man, you got all summer to screw around with Sinclair,” Bill said. He handed his cig over to Steve so Steve took a drag. “Only gonna be gone for like a week, we can do shit when you get back.”

“I guess.” She looked all upset and Steve didn’t know why. “What are you going to do without me? Who’s gonna help you budget?”

Billy looked crazy amused by her. He had this face that he got on whenever Max did something he thought was cute or funny; his eyebrows went up real high. “Oh, don’t you worry ‘bout me, I got Harrington here to handle all my shit.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of him.”

“Will you?” Bill asked him. Steve gave him a look and blew some smoke in his face. “We can do tons of fun shit when you get back, Stevie said we can go campin’ together.”

“Really?” Max looked all excited into two seconds; she made her happy goldfish face and trained her gaze on him. “Did you say that?”

“Uhhh,” Steve said. He guessed he had said that, before. He and Billy had kind of talked about it. Well, gotten into an argument about it, really. Bill hadn’t wanted to tell Max about them. “Yeah, we can do that if you want.”

It was weird to think about – *before*. Before they’d had their big fight and before Bill had been – gone or whatever. It felt like all of that shit had happened so long ago but it had only been a couple of weeks, really. Steve had wanted to do stuff with him but Bill hadn’t

really wanted to do stuff. Steve had kinda thought that all he'd ever get with Bill was sneakin' around in their rooms or something.

"Harrington's a professional Boy Scout, bet he knows all the spots."

Max made a great face, making fun of him. Her eyebrows went up too. "That does not surprise me."

"We can go to, uh, one of the state parks or something," Steve said anyway. "Summit Lake's nice. Kinda far. Or just stay around here." He didn't really think he'd ever want to go camping in the woods around Hawkins again, though.

"I don't really have any camping stuff. We went once when I was like seven or something," Max told him. "My mom and dad."

"We can get you stuff."

She was looking a little excited now. "Okay, well, don't forget, you *said* we could go to Lake Michigan too, is that still happening?"

"Uh," Steve said again. "Yeah, we can go if you guys want."

Billy didn't say anything; he was watching the TV. Steve could feel his elbow digging into his side. Max shifted across from them, tucked her feet up under herself. "What's your aunt's place like?"

"Ah, it's not that fancy. Only has four bathrooms," Steve said; Max grinned at him. "No, it's nice, it's got a dock and stuff. I haven't been in like two or three years. We can go if you want, she'll let me take it whenever."

"Really? You'll really take us? You promise?"

"Uh, sure." He was still trying not to feel weird.

Max looked over. "Hello? Billy?"

"If that's what you guys want." Bill leaned over the coffee table to stamp out his cigarette into the ashtray.

Max went off to bed a little while later; she was workin' from ten to

three the next day. Bill said he'd probably be gone by the time she got up. He waited until a pop song he hated came on MTV and then stood up. He rolled his eyes; Max had left her pizza crusts on the coffee table like a little savage.

Steve watched him pick them up and toss them into the little trash can by the stove. He stood up too and folded their blanket back up. He carried the pizza box over to the counter, then sat down at the table. He still felt kind of weird.

"Oh. Thanks." Bill took the box and made room in the fridge. Steve watched him move shit around.

Billy closed up the fridge and leaned with his elbows on the counter (Steve had a nice view of his great ass). The flowers that Steve'd got him the other week were next to the stove; Bill reached out to touch a stem and a few petals fluttered to the counter. "Guess these are done, should probably throw them out. Shoulda pressed 'em or something. Could have kept one."

"What's that?"

"You know, like in a book?" Bill said. "My mom used to do that shit."

"Oh right." He felt dumb again; he knew about that. "I can just get you some more."

Bill snorted. "Yeah, okay." He turned around so that he was looking at Steve and gripped the counter's edge behind himself. He looked real tired. He had a little band-aid on his arm that Steve hadn't noticed before. He wondered if he'd had to get blood drawn or something. "So what you doin', you staying here tonight?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess." Steve was just looking at him too.

"What?"

"Nothing." The light from the ceiling fan was too bright; he dropped his gaze and looked down at the surface of the kitchen table. It had some watermarks already, rings from drinking glasses. The sharp corner near where he was sitting was chipped – Max and he had bumped their hips on it like twelve times already. Steve'd taken shop

class for three years, and he'd taken a wood-working class one summer as a kid. He could totally build Bill a better table than this. Probably a better bookshelf too. He still had a bunch of old tools out in the garage.

"Okay." When he glanced up again, Billy was still leaned back against the counter and looking at him. He had his eyebrows raised up again. Bill had nice eyebrows too, dark pretty eyelashes like a girl (not that Steve would ever tell him that). "All right?" Bill asked him.

"Sure, nothing," Steve said again; Bill kept on looking at him like he was waiting for Steve to say something else.

Great. This was always what happened when they – okay, it wasn't like he wanted to have some dramatic conversation. Not all the time, anyway. It just seemed like when he and Bill ever tried to talk about anything that wasn't food or sports or music or making fun of each other, all they'd end up doing was stutterin' out these two-syllable words over and over again at each other like *Okay* and *Nothing* and *All right*. Wait that last one was two words.

Steve stretched his arms out across the table and folded his hands up. He looked at his fingers laced together and not at Billy. He guessed he had to say something else. "Uh, I just – what, do you really wanna do all that shit?"

"What shit?"

"The – camping and stuff."

"Yeah, I just said," Bill said flatly.

"Okay." It wasn't a big thing but it was a thing. "I just mean, like – yeah, if we went out to Michigan or whatever, I'd have to take off of work and stuff."

"Oh. Yeah, me too."

"Can you do that?" Steve asked him.

Bill shrugged. "Guess so. Already took off for a while," he said like it was funny.

“Uh, okay,” Steve said. “I just wanna know if you’re serious, because you ...” he stopped.

“What?” Bill could get defensive in two seconds. His voice had that sharp edge to it already; Steve knew it so well.

Steve didn’t answer him right away. Probably shouldn’t get into it. He didn’t want to get into it; he didn’t actually feel like talking about it. Plus he felt bad – Billy’d had a long day and probably a shitty day. He’d probably had to be nice to like five or six people. “It doesn’t, yeah, it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Billy rubbed the side of his neck with a hand, then he rubbed his face too. Then he just kept looking at Steve. “Because what?”

“Okay, it’s nothing.”

He was making Steve feel pretty dumb. He shouldn’t have opened his mouth and asked about the camping thing or the lake thing or whatever. He didn’t feel like gettin’ pissed off or gettin’ Bill pissed off. It was just – the last time they’d gotten pissed off at each other had been when they’d had their massive fight *before*.

Steve knew he’d just been thinking that Billy was almost like a new person now, but he wasn’t really a new person. He was still the same guy who Steve’d liked for however many months now.

He was still the same guy who had said all that shit at the start of June and told Steve that he didn’t want him. Even if he hadn’t meant all those things before, he’d still said them. Steve guessed they were still in his head, even if he had other stuff in there now too. Because what? *Uh, because a month ago you basically told me our relationship means nothing and that we can’t keep this going for too long, you know, so I just wanna make sure you’re not going to do that again before we plan a bunch of shit.*

He really didn’t feel like saying that though. Part of him did, but most of him didn’t. He felt like a little kid or something; he didn’t want to know what Billy would say back. They’d had that big talk about it before but nothing since the other week. Bill’d been all

doped up then anyway – he might not have meant it like he'd said it. He'd said *you know I'm in love with you* too like Steve was actually supposed to know, but he didn't know. He didn't know what that even *meant* to Billy.

It made him feel like a fucking girl or something, thinking about this crap. His love life. Bill was gonna call him a fucking girl, and he was gonna laugh and say, *You wanna plan a family vacation?*

"Come on, man," Bill said. "You always do this. Just fuckin' say what you gotta say. I know you ain't scared of me."

He felt kind of annoyed. "What, you always do this too." Bill just stared at him. "Uh, fine. Okay, because, because you – didn't wanna do all that stuff before."

"Well, I do now."

"Okay," Steve said again. He was pretty sure he was making a stupid squinty face. "So ... what happens when you change your mind again?"

Billy looked at him blankly. "I won't," he said.

"Right," Steve said. He definitely knew more words than that. "Yeah, no, that's fine. We can go camping. Whatever."

"Yeah?" Bill pushed himself up off the counter. He sat down at the table next to Steve. "What, you pissed off now?"

"Nope. No, it doesn't matter."

"You don't wanna go or whatever?"

"No, I do."

Bill looked annoyed; he usually did. "Yeah, well you – " he stopped and made a face. "Thought we talked about this already."

"Yep. We did," Steve said shortly. "It's fine, I'm not – "

"Yeah, okay." He made another face, then grabbed the leg of Steve's

chair and dragged him closer. Bill was *really* strong. “Look, I said I didn’t – mean that shit before.”

“Sure, I know.” Well he mostly knew.

Bill just stared at him. “Okay,” he said. He reached over and pulled Steve’s hands apart, turned his wrist over. He stared at their hands together with a weird look on his face; Steve didn’t know what he looked like. “This’s what you do, right?” he said.

“Uh, don’t really know what you’re talking about – “

“Shut up,” Billy interrupted him. He tapped at the strap of Steve’s wristwatch. “Bet this shit’s real silver,” he muttered. “I ain’t never had nothin’ like that. Got my girl a silver bracelet once. She gave me her class ring.”

“That, that’s great,” Steve said without meaning to; Bill looked up at him.

“You want me to say sorry again?”

“No.” He really didn’t. He looked back down at the table so he didn’t have to look at Bill’s huge blue eyes and get all stupid in three seconds. “No, it’s not, uh – ”

“I didn’t mean that shit before,” Bill told him again. “I was scared, all right? I always wanted to do that stuff with you.”

“Okay.”

“Wanted to go places or whatever.”

“Okay.”

Billy chewed on his lower lip, drew it between his teeth. One of his top teeth was a little crooked, one of the pointy ones – he’d always catch his lip on it. Steve thought it was pretty cute. Pretty cute, or pretty annoying, depending on how pissed off Bill was making him. He watched Billy push his jaw out for a second, like he was thinking.

“You ‘member when we went to the movies that first time?” he asked

slowly. "Like in the city. The drive-in."

"Yeah, of course."

He turned Steve's wrist over in his hands. Steve stared at him doing it, then he looked at their hands together too. It was kind of strange to see. Not bad or anything, but strange. Different. Steve's hands were bigger but Bill's were broader. His skin was a shade or two darker than Steve's; once Mrs. Henderson had said that Billy had a farmer's tan and Bill's eyes had practically bugged out of his head.

"Almost skipped town when you asked me to do that," Bill told him. He chewed on his lip some more. "Turned out okay though, I guess."

"Yeah, I liked it."

"Uh," Bill said. "Right. So, listen – uh, I thought about you a lot when I was with the kid, okay? When I was in the hospital. Didn't think you'd even wanna talk to me no more."

"We, yeah, we don't have to talk about – "

"Guess we do," Billy said flatly. "So, I, uh – " he kind of laughed. He looked weird again. "Look, I know I told you before that I didn't ... almost die, but I really thought I was gonna fuckin' die, okay?"

Steve stared at him; he felt frozen. He'd really thought Billy had been dead too.

Bill let his wrist go. "And then, you know, I didn't die," he said in this real stilted voice. "And ... then I came back here. And ... uh, *you* were still here. Fuckin' camped outside my place for like a week."

"Uh, I just – "

"Look, I care about you," Billy interrupted him. He really just said it, even though he was looking at Steve's wrist again. "Okay? Said I want to be with you. I wanna be with you. That shit means something to me."

"I," Steve said brilliantly. Jesus. Bill was actually saying all this important crap for once, and of course Steve had no fucking clue

what to say back to it. He was such a stud. All of his thoughts had just flown out of his huge Big Bird nose again he guessed. "Yeah, it means something to me too."

"And I don't wanna make you feel like – I don't wanna act that way no more. I told you I wouldn't screw it up again or whatever. I'll do whatever you want." He looked up again, sharply. "So I wanna go fucking camping, okay?"

"Okay," Steve managed. "I – " He didn't know what to say. He felt all gushy inside again like he had at the roller rink. "Yeah, I mean, we don't have to do that shit though. We could do something else. Whatever you want."

"Nah, we're definitely goin' to your family's ritzy place," Billy told him; Steve grinned. "We can go campin' too." He added, "Max needs her own tent."

"Oh, definitely. Like, ah – pink one to piss her off or something."

"Yeah. Sure." Bill smiled at him too. "Look, you okay? I'm tired."

Steve thought about it. He felt good. "Yep, I'm okay. Sorry I made ya say stuff."

"Guess it's okay." Bill stood up and Steve followed him.

"Can I shower here?"

"Yeah, go ahead. You need somethin' to wear?"

"No, I'm good, I finally brought stuff," Steve told him.

Billy went off to his bedroom and Steve took a shower. He liked the bathroom here, which was probably a dumb thing. The shower had a glass door, and someone kept moving a rubber duck around everywhere (it glowed in the dark). On Wednesday night it'd been on the sink; now it fell and hit Steve on the head when he slid back the door of the shower. The tiles were grey with white specks on them, and the sink had a big mirror above it that opened up like a medicine cabinet. All their stuff was organized on to three shelves; Bill said the organized part wouldn't last long. There was a plant on the little

windowsill – one of those ivy ones with the long trailing leaves – and Max kept puttin' some fuzzy blue cover on the toilet lid and Bill kept taking it off.

Steve was in the shower for a while even though he didn't mean to be. He was thinking about Billy and thinking his Steve-thoughts. He'd forgotten to take along something to put his contacts in and he debated leaving them in for the night or just tossing them. He could wear his glasses for like a week he guessed.

Steve balanced the rubber duck on the shower faucet so it'd stare at Max or Billy tomorrow. Probably Billy because he had to get up early for class.

Lucky duck. Ha! Steve dried his hair the best he could and put the towel back around his waist. He took his contacts out and brushed his teeth with the green toothbrush that Max'd picked out for him from Walmart.

Bill was already asleep when Steve came into the bedroom. He was flopped out kinda on the side of the bed that Steve'd been sleeping on like he was waiting for him; it was kind of adorable really. He didn't move when Steve said his name twice and closed the door – Steve knew he'd been tired as shit. He felt bad tryin' to wake him up.

So much for his big seduction plans. He'd brushed his teeth and everything. Well, there was always tomorrow.

He turned the ceiling fan on and turned the little light by the bedside table on too, just in case Billy woke up later (really he didn't mind the light being on either). There was more stuff around now – maybe Bill'd picked up some junk when he'd been at his dad's place. He definitely had more books just in here than Steve'd ever even read.

Steve put his clothes on and crawled into Bill's bed in his boxer briefs. The bed was nice; it was bigger and it didn't squeak like the one at his old place. Well Steve guessed Max had it now. He moved Bill's arm so that he could lay down and once again Billy didn't move or even twitch – Bill slept like a fucking corpse. He'd said before that Steve hogged all the blankets on the bed, but Steve didn't know how he could even know that, because Bill slept like a corpse.

He looked at his dead-to-the-world boyfriend – he guessed he could say that or think that even if it was still kinda weird – and then he looked around the bedroom. The lava lamp wasn't too bright.

He looked at the book that Bill must be reading. It was some big John Steinbeck book; he guessed Bill liked him. He wondered if Billy's best buddy Angela Davis had gave it to him or if he just had it. Maybe they could start a book club (Bill'd hit him so hard if he heard that).

It was cute to think about Bill readin' his book in the bed; maybe he had been last night. Well it was just a normal-person thing to do, but it was really cute. Steve guessed he thought pretty much everything about Billy was cute. Bill might slug him if he heard that too.

Bill moved like a zombie in his sleep and slung a heavy arm over Steve – he wasn't expecting it even with the slow zombie-speed and kinda jumped. Bill put his face against Steve's neck too.

“Are you awake?” Steve asked him. “Bills?” The corpse didn't answer. “Okay.”

He shifted around until he wasn't being crushed by Bill's arm anymore. He put an arm around Billy too and looked at the side of his tired face in the weak light of the lava lamp. The ceiling fan was humming away, making him feel sleepy. *I care about you.* It really meant something. He was awake for a while longer, not too long. He kept on thinking his thoughts. He fell asleep with Bill drooling on his collarbone.

Billy's alarm clock went off the next morning at quarter-to eight which was way too early for a Saturday. Bill smacked it hard with an open palm and flopped back down on the bed. “THIS IS FUCKING BULLSHIT,” he said into his pillow. He threw an arm around Steve and buried his face against the side of his neck; Steve closed his eyes. They fell asleep again.

The clock went off again ten minutes later and Billy hit it so hard it

fell off the end-table. “Fuck.” He sat up and scrubbed a hand through his hair, then tossed his blanket over Steve. He got up and stalked down the hallway. Steve heard the water turn on twice and something thunked out in the kitchen. He closed his eyes again.

Bill came back after a while and stood in the doorway brushing his teeth. He looked like a little kid for a moment. He was wearing the same cut-up t-shirt from last night and his jeans with all the holes in them. His hair was wet; it looked like gold. “I made coffee,” he said. He went back into (Steve guessed) the bathroom to spit toothpaste into the sink and came back. “You sleepin' more?”

“Mm. No. I'm getting up, I gotta get up,” Steve said. His brain felt kinda fuzzy because it was still early; Billy climbed on top of him and he felt even fuzzier. “Hello,” he said like a nerd.

“Hi.” Bill put his toothbrush down on the nightstand and kissed him. He tasted like Crest toothpaste. Steve was pretty sure he didn't taste like Crest toothpaste, but Bill didn't point this out. He kissed Steve a second time, slower now. It was nice.

Okay he was awake. Well, part of him was awake. Not his brain. Haha. He kinda felt like a lamb about to get slaughtered again. “Don't get up, stay here in the bed til I get back,” Bill told him.

Steve laughed. “What, like your concubine?”

“Big word for you at eight in the morning,” Billy said. “OW! Why you wanna hit me? I'll only be like three hours.”

“I have stuff to do.”

Billy kissed him some more and Steve put his arms around him. He was really tempted to stay in the bed for three more hours and be the concubine. Was that supposed to be a woman? Anyway he could totally sleep til eleven.

No he couldn't. He put his hands in Billy's hair and pulled back a little. “I have stuff to do.”

Bill didn't look very concerned. They kissed again – Bill's face was scratchy. “What stuff?” he mumbled into Steve's mouth. “Hm?”

Hockey thing.”

“Yeah, you can play with us if you want.”

“I got class,” Billy reminded him like he was slow. He had this nice smile on his face like Steve was amusing him.

“We can wait for ya next week, move it to the afternoon.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Bill wrinkled his nose up. He was such a (cute) little snob. “Be better ‘f it was roller hockey or somethin’.”

“Okay, I just said I’d ask you.” He tightened his grip around Bill’s waist. “Hey, go out with me tonight.”

“Yeah, you wanna go to the movies?”

“Uh, no.” He’d been thinking his Steve-thoughts last night; it was time to put his plan into action. He ran a hand down Bill’s back and tried to look as seductive as possible. “We should, we should do something nice.”

Billy had been reaching out across the nightstand for his toothbrush again; he paused and gave Steve a mistrustful look. He popped his toothbrush back into his mouth and looked even more mistrustful. “Why?”

“Well, you know, it’s your prom night tonight,” Steve told him. “We should go out and celebrate.”

Billy made a face. “Thanks, I’m good,” he mumbled around his toothbrush.

“Take that outta your mouth.” Steve yanked at the handle. Bill tried to squirm away so Steve grabbed him again. Bill kned him in the stomach (with love, Steve assumed). “Don’t you wanna do something special?”

He was still making a face. “Not really.”

“Come on, it’s like your last big thing before you graduate.”

“What, you wanna take me to my prom?”

“Well, no, I – “

Bill tried to get away again but Steve had him pretty trapped. He scowled with Steve's arms around him. “Cause I seriously don't want to go to that shit. Don't, look, don't make a thing out of it.”

“I'm not making a thing,” Steve lied; Billy looked really skeptical.

“I'm serious, man,” he said. “I been thinkin' all year how much I don't wanna do that shit, I finally don't gotta do it. You ain't gonna find some little diary around here saying I secretly wanna go or whatever.”

“Bills, do you have a diary?” Steve asked him; Billy slugged him in the chest. “Ah!” Steve laughed. “Oh my god, asshole, I'm not gonna make you go to the dance. We can go out to, like, to the city or something.”

Billy still looked skeptical. “Thanks, I'm good,” he said again.

“You don't wanna go out with me?” Steve asked him innocently. “You said you'd do whatever I want.”

“That's low, man.” He narrowed his eyes.

“Lemme take you out.”

“What, like to a dance club?”

“If that's what you want,” Steve said. Billy looked actually terrified – he was so fun. “No, not to a dance club, you idiot. Okay, so I was thinking – “

“Thought I smelled something burnin' in here while I was – BITCH!” Billy said when Steve pinched him. He smacked Steve back. “Okay, Jesus.”

“Can I talk?”

“Whole fuckin' state knows you can talk.” He looked like a sulky kid.

Steve ignored him being a sulky kid. He'd been thinking a lot last night before he'd fallen asleep. Bill had had a really shitty month; they should do something nice. He definitely didn't need to go to his prom or whatever, but they could do something nice. Steve could make it nice. "We could go – look, uh, you remember they got – they're doing those summer concerts out in Indianapolis, we could go out to like the docks or something. Gotta be some weird punk band that you'd be into."

Bill just sat lookin' down at him. "What, you'd wanna do that?"

"Yeah, if you want. Like we talked about." He still looked pretty unconvinced so Steve said, "We could bring Max or whatever too so it wouldn't be weird." He knew he'd been kinda thinking that Max was killin' his mojo with Bill lately, but it wasn't like he still didn't like having her around. She was the one who'd been talking about the summer concerts in the first place. He and Billy couldn't really hook up in the city anyway; it might be nice to have her around.

"It wouldn't be weird," Bill told him. He actually looked kind of hurt or something – Steve didn't know how he'd said the wrong thing already.

"No, I just mean she can come with us. She wanted to go before."

Billy narrowed his eyes and looked at him some more. He pushed his jaw out a little; he was deciding. "Okay. We can do that if you want," he said slowly. "If you don't make a big fuckin' deal out of it."

"Okay," Steve lied. He was going to make a pretty big deal out of it. Well not really but they could have some fun. "It'll be cool, I'll buy you some food and a beer."

"Your baby face can't get me no beer," Bill said; Steve smiled at him.

"Yeah? So you wanna go?"

"I guess." Bill moved away again and Steve finally let him up. He watched Billy put his belt on and slide his wallet into his back pocket. "Uh, I gotta go in a minute."

"Okay. You wanna be ready at like four? I can come pick you up, it'll

take a while to get out there.”

“I guess.” Bill just stood in the doorway lookin' at him. He started brushing his teeth again.

“Okay.” They stared at each other. “So, uh, it's a date.”

Billy rolled his eyes and kept brushing his teeth. “I gotta spit.”

“Huh, I thought you usually swallowed,” Steve said; Billy flipped him off and wandered back to the bathroom.

He came back and stood staring in the doorway again. He looked weirdly uncertain. “Four o'clock?” he said.

“Yeah, is that okay?”

“I guess.” Bill didn't exactly look excited but he didn't look like he was makin' plans to go to the dentist either. “Don't be early or whatever, I gotta get ready.”

“Okay, me too.”

“Yeah, okay. Ask Max if she wants to go later.”

“Have fun at class,” Steve told him; Billy rolled his eyes and didn't answer. He left the bedroom door open behind him. A couple seconds later Steve heard the front door close.

Steve laid there for a while longer and thought about getting up. It was so difficult. Bill's bed was comfy even though he'd said it'd been cheap. He had like three blankets; Steve had two of 'em and Bill had given him the good pillow last night. He almost fell asleep again and then he remembered he definitely had to do stuff now.

He got up finally and made the bed (creatively, since there were three blankets). He put his change of clothes on that he'd brought over last night and went into the bathroom to pee. The duck was over on the windowsill now; Steve put it back on the sink.

Max was in the kitchen drinkin' all the coffee that Billy'd made. She was wearing her red work vest to go to the general store and Steve

told her he'd drop her off. She said that she totally wanted to go to the pier concert and that he should definitely get Bill more flowers. She seemed pretty excited. She even made him some pancakes (and more coffee, too).

He stopped by the flower shop before he met up with the guys – they were totally swamped and all because of prom but the lady at the counter said she could have his order by three-thirty since it wasn't too fancy. It was the same cute girl who'd been working last time and she remembered him. “Don't you need something to match?” she asked him.

“Nope, just the one.”

He got all bruised up playing hockey and scraped his knee like a kid; now he had a pair of jeans that had holes in them too. Alex said that he was havin' a party at the end of the month when his parents went to Bermuda and everyone could bring whoever they wanted.

Steve filed that away in his head to tell Billy about later. He didn't exactly know if Bill and him gettin' drunk together at a party was a good idea, but it'd probably be a fun one. He bought the guys their sandwiches even though his and Kyle's team had won again and went on home. It was getting close to two already.

His mom was home when he got back which was surprising. Steve sat and ate lunch with her even though he'd already ate (twice). He wanted to sit with her even though she started in on him in two seconds asking him why he was walkin' around with the knee of his jeans blown out.

“Are you making a statement?” she asked him; she was cracking herself up. She shouldn't be asking him about statements when she was wearin' a blue pantsuit like it was 1971.

Steve didn't crack on his mom's wardrobe because unlike her he was

a nice person. He told her about Dad being a dick at work during the week, and she told him about the new book she'd got to edit. She said it was a real mess, some rich guy who thought he could write.

Mom got up to make more coffee while Steve put their dishes away. She gave him some coffee and he sat back at the table and let her fuss over him. She asked him what his plans were for the weekend so he told her about takin' Bill and Max out to the city.

"Oh, that'll be nice. You know they do the jazz fests in August," Mom said. She laughed at Steve making a face over the jazz fests. "I'm just saying."

"Hey, what's the fastest way to get into the city without takin' 42?"

"Why wouldn't you take 42?" Mom asked him. "It's the most direct way."

"Thanks, I know that." Steve hadn't really wanted to tell her or even think about it, but he guessed he had to tell her a little eventually. He guessed maybe he did want to tell her. It felt weird saying it, like actually saying it. "Uh, Bill crashed his car up on 42 a couple weeks ago, I don't really wanna take him past it."

He didn't really want to go past it either. He'd probably cry or something. Well not really but he didn't need to see it. Maybe they'd fixed the guardrail by now.

Mom stared at him; she was over by the big counter lookin' through the mail. She put her papers down. One delicate eyebrow went up. "What do you mean he crashed his car?"

"Uh, I mean he crashed his car, someone ran him off the road." That part was true.

"Is he all right?"

"Yeah, he's fine." Mom stared at him some more. "Uh, he messed his arm up and all. He looked pretty bad. Car's all smashed up."

That started up her twenty questions and Steve felt real guilty lying to her; he always did. He'd lied to her enough about normal teenaged

shit before any of the real crazy stuff had started going down, he guessed. There was no way he could tell her about what had really happened to Bill without tellin' her about – well, everything else that'd happened.

No, Bill was okay. No, they didn't know why somebody would wanna do that, Steve said. It wasn't somebody they knew, some nut. No, Billy actually didn't start something with somebody for once – Steve wondered what even his *mom* had heard about Bill. No, they didn't take anything off him. Yeah, his car was all right, mostly. Yeah, he was pretty shook up.

Mom asked if Steve had gone to see him when he'd been the hospital and Steve said yeah again. That wasn't really a lie because he had gone there after all. Just hadn't got to see Bill like he'd wanted to. “You should have told me,” Mom said.

“When would I tell you, you haven't been home.”

Mom gave him a big look that made him feel about eight years old. She could make him feel so guilty, and he hadn't even done anything. “You could have called me.”

“It doesn't matter,” Steve lied. “What, he's fine.”

“I can't even imagine. I would bet that his parents were so worried.”

God. His mom was funny sometimes. “Uh, his stepmom was.”

He felt really bad talkin' about Billy without him being there. He'd told his mom once before that Bill's dad smacked him around and he'd felt so shitty about it afterwards; Billy would hate Steve telling her that. He just hadn't known what to do about it. He'd told his mom that Bill's dad smacked him around sometimes, but he hadn't told her that Bill's dad had been beatin' on him his whole life or anything. She'd totally flip out and then Bill would kill him. Steve kinda felt like somebody needed to flip out about it, though. He didn't know how you could live like that. He knew a lot of people did, but he'd never really thought about it until he'd met Billy and Max.

But anyway Bill had his place now so maybe it'd be okay. If Steve had

anything to do with it, he'd make it so that Billy wouldn't ever have to see his old man again. Not that he could really do that but you know. Pipe dreams, they were nice. He'd already decided that he never wanted to see Bill get hurt again. He said, "Max's been hangin' out with him a lot. He was, like, all busted up."

"Poor thing." Mom actually looked sad. Okay he shouldn't say 'actually.' She wasn't really heartless or whatever. She tapped at her nail with her red nails. "Well, I guess I can see why you've been staying at his apartment so often," she said placidly; Steve was pretty sure he managed not to make any sort of face.

Mom was just looking at him. She looked real pretty like she usually did and she also looked pretty terrifying. She was making him feel about eight again – she had like x-ray vision or something. "So did you two sort out your fight?" Steve stared at her and she stared back. "Honestly, Steven. Do you think I couldn't tell something was going on with you?"

"I'm, yeah, I'm not – " God she probably knew. How could she know? She couldn't know. He thought back to *before* when he'd run off to Aunt Mary's to sulk for three days and how his mom had said *I bet Billy could cheer you up*. He realized she'd been trying to work him over – he was such a dummy. "I'm not, I'm not talking about that right now. I'm not talking about that with you."

"I didn't say you had to talk about it." She kept on looking at him and he felt weird, not the same kind of weird as last night.

She might not know – Steve never knew what his mother was thinking. She might be looking at him and thinking about that book she had to read over for her job; she might be thinking about what she was going to do for dinner or the wine she was gonna buy. She might be looking at him and thinking about him and Bill.

Steve had thought maybe he'd feel bad about it if his mom ever found out about him and Bill – he'd thought he might feel ashamed or something. Like his mom might be disappointed. She probably wouldn't scream or go into hysterics or anything but she might be disappointed in him (it seemed like she usually was anyway). It probably wouldn't be what she wanted for him. Not because it was

Billy, exactly – his mom liked Bill – but because it was a guy or whatever. It just wouldn't be what she'd wanted for him.

He didn't really feel bad though or ashamed or anything. He didn't really care. He had a date tonight and Billy'd said *I want to be with you*. Steve just stared back at his mom since she'd said he didn't have to talk about it.

“Well, are you going to be home later tonight? I came home for you.”

Even his own mom was killing his mojo. He didn't want to come home; he wanted to stay at Bill's place and hook up with him.

He hadn't seen his mom for weeks, though. She might not know that Bill was his date tonight or whatever. “Yeah, I'll come home.” He tried not to sound too down about it.

“All right. We can raid your father's liquor cabinet.” She got their mail sorted and stood lookin' at him some more. She came and sat back at the table.

Steve drank his coffee. Mom was still looking at him; he felt scared that she was gonna start with him again. She put her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand, looking at him. Then she said, “If you want to take the Interstate and loop around through Logansport, it's about an extra half hour. Go on exit nine, you can take the bridge into the city.”

“Oh, right.” He'd forgot about the bridge. “Yeah, thanks.”

Mom played with his hair – he probably needed to get it cut again. It was at that stupid length where it stuck out over his ears. Steve made a face at her and she made one back. “I miss you, you know. You could still bring your friends over here.”

“What, I still do.”

“You can bring Max and Billy over here. I'm not very scary.”

“Uh, that's debatable,” Steve said; Mom smiled at him.

“We should have them over for dinner again. Maybe next week.”

"I'm not cooking again," Steve said right away.

"No, you're not," Mom said right away too. She made him laugh.

Finally Mom left him alone and Steve could relax again. Not really relax – he had to get ready.

He guessed he had a plan for how he wanted the night to go, but he didn't know if it'd go like he wanted it to. It'd be the first time he and Bill had really done something together since he'd gotten back. Kmart with El and Max or skating with the Monster Squad or making out on the couch didn't really count. Especially the couch thing because Eleven had already busted in on them once last week.

He felt a little nervous goin' out on a date with Bill even though he guessed they'd been on dates before. It seemed kinda different now, even if Max was going too as their little chaperon. He didn't want to make a huge deal out of it but he wanted Billy to have a nice time.

It was always hard to think of stuff to do with Bill, like date stuff – he wasn't like some girl that Steve could wine and dine and impress. Sometimes that didn't impress them anyway; he guessed Nancy'd never really wanted to do too much of that stuff either. He guessed he knew why now. Maybe he'd known before too.

Anyway, it wasn't like he wanted to wine and dine Billy or do all that romantic shit. Not all the time. But sometimes he wanted to go out with Bill and know they were together. Mostly though when they went out it still just felt like they were hangin' out. It felt good, like how it was supposed to feel. Maybe because they'd been friends first. Well, they were friends. More than friends.

Steve took a shower and tried to make his hair not stick up. He spent a while deciding what to wear; they weren't really doing anything fancy. He put his jeans on and a brown collared shirt that had stripes on the sleeves. He sighed and put his huge loser glasses on.

It was getting close to four, so he drove to the flower shop and got his stuff. He had to wait a while for it and then he went over to Bill's

place. He smoked a cigarette out on the street so he wouldn't be early, then went on up.

Bill answered the door. He looked surprised to see him even though it was a quarter-past. He was wearing one of his romance-novel shirts all unbuttoned; it was the black one. "Hey, gimme a sec." He let Steve in and did his shirt up. "You look good."

"Thanks, you too." He really did.

Billy always looked good – it used to annoy Steve. Back when he'd first *become acquainted* with Bill he'd thought that Billy was just some arrogant asshole who walked around thinkin' he could get whoever he wanted; he'd wondered what that was like. Steve knew he looked okay and all – sometimes he thought he looked pretty good. He could make himself look good.

Billy looked *really* good, though, and he didn't even try. He didn't even look like a normal person; he looked like a, a model or something. Or – not even a model because sometimes in the magazines they just looked like regular people. Bill looked like a frickin' swimsuit model or something. Or an underwear model. Heh.

Even after they'd become friends, Steve guessed he'd been a little jealous or something. Well he'd thought he'd been jealous. It had felt bad; he didn't like feeling jealous of his friends or resenting them. Then he'd realized it was okay to just – want Bill. That had been a big week and a big revelation. Steve couldn't even really tell when that'd started to happen, the wanting thing. Maybe back around Christmas time when he'd gone out and bought Bill this record player because Bill's old man had busted his up. He hadn't gave it to him 'til his birthday; he hadn't wanted Bill to think he was in love with him or something. Then he'd wondered why he'd thought about that so much.

Billy finished buttoning up his shirt (he actually buttoned it almost the whole way up for once) and then he stared at Steve with the same mistrustful look as this morning. "What you got?" he asked him. He was frowning down at the flower in Steve's hand.

"Oh. It's for you." Steve handed it over. It was another white lily.

Bill took the flower from him; he stared at it like it was a puzzle piece. "S'it for?"

"It's like a corsage, you pin it on your shirt."

"You want me to wear it?" Billy actually looked petrified – he was so fun. Steve laughed a little bit.

"No, you – you don't actually have to wear it, I just got it for you."

Bill just stared at him and Steve felt kind of stupid, like he was doing the wrong thing again somehow. He had kind of gotten it to be funny, but it wasn't a joke or something.

He'd thought maybe Bill would want to have it – he'd said he should've kept the flowers. He could put it in his little shoebox or whatever and then, later, when he looked at it, he could remember when he and Steve had went out, not to the prom.

"Uh, you can put it in your *Grapes* book or something." Bill looked totally blank so Steve supplied, "That big book in your room."

"Oh. Right." He had a really funny expression on his face. Okay the flower had been a bad idea. "Thanks," he said in a weird voice.

Steve looked around. There was a bunch of stuff everywhere, clothes folded on the coffee table. He leaned over and rested his arms against the back of the couch. "You did laundry?" he asked and then thought that was a stupid question.

"Yeah, I had to get ready for you." Bill was just holding the flower and looking at it. "Had to go down in the fuckin' creepy basement all by myself."

Oh. God. Steve hadn't thought about the laundry bein' in the basement here. He felt like total shit in two seconds. Probably Bill wasn't super thrilled about going down there, since he'd just frickin' gotten beat up and thrown in a basement for five days. "Oh, I – I could go with you next time."

Bill rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I was fine," he said. "Lady from the diner came down when I was finishin' up, she watched me fold my

underwear.”

“I bet she did.”

Billy didn't answer him; he put the flower down on the coffee table and then stood looking at him. He looked at the corsage and then back at Steve. He had an even weirder expression on his face now. Steve said, “So do you – “ and Bill grabbed him by the arms and shoved him backwards. He pushed him against the back of one of the counters that blocked off the kitchen.

Steve's head banged against one of the cabinets. “Uh, ow?” he said. He wondered if Bill had finally snapped and was just going to slug him again or something.

“You make me feel so fuckin' stupid all the time, bringin' me this shit,” Billy said and kissed him.

Oh. Or that. It wasn't exactly a nice kiss – it was *not* gentle – but it made him kind of dizzy anyway. He definitely wanted to kiss Billy. He'd been waiting all day. “Uh, I wasn't,” he mumbled; Billy kissed him again. Steve's glasses smushed against his face. “I didn't get it like as a joke – “

“Yeah I know,” Bill said. He put his hand on the back of Steve's neck and put his tongue in Steve's mouth. Whee. Steve wound an arm around his back and put his other hand on Bill's belt buckle to pull him in closer. Billy pressed against him. Okay. Yeah. They had time for that. He –

“AHEM!” someone said loudly; it was Max. Steve and Billy broke apart, and Steve turned his head to look behind him. Max was sitting at the little table in the kitchen eating Cocoa Puffs and staring at them over the counter. She looked real unimpressed with them both.

Steve hadn't even noticed her earlier. Well he guessed he hadn't been lookin' for Max. He'd been looking at Billy doing his shirt up like a little horn-dog.

Steve grinned abashedly. “Hey, Max.”

She looked bored. Her cheeks puffed out with her cereal. “Hi Steve.”

“Forgot you was here,” Billy told her; Max rolled her eyes.

“Are you guys done?”

“Don't think we really started,” Bill said. Heh. He let Steve go finally. He picked up his clothes and his corsage and went off to his room.

Steve turned around and leaned on the counter looking at Max. She looked back at him and chomped away at her cereal.

He fixed his hair. “Hey, why are you eating? We're going to get stuff.”

“I don't know, are we even going?” Max asked him all smart. “Can you stop making out with my brother for five minutes?”

Somehow he managed not to say *He started it*. “Five minutes, yeah. After that I don't know.”

Max looked pained by him already; Steve was having fun.

They set off towards the city – Bill did not pin the flower to his shirt, but that wasn't why Steve'd gotten it – and fought over the radio for a bit. Billy was in the passenger seat of Steve's car and Max was in the back. No one could decide on a station; Steve felt happy when Genesis came on singing 'Misunderstanding' and then he felt less happy when Bill immediately switched it off two seconds later.

“No, man, we ain't doing that tonight,” Bill told him.

“Okay, fine, find something you like.”

“I am.” Bill put the college radio on. Some weirdo band called the Pixies was playin' their first single. Max said she liked it so Bill turned it up.

Really Steve put up with so much from both of them. He never said anything about the crazy shit they liked. Okay, barely anything.

Max turned into Miss Chatterbox tellin' Steve all about her day and about Billy's day. Steve liked hearing her talk. Mrs. Byers had a big date next weekend and Will was goin' away to press-printing camp in

August. Beverly had got a raise at the grocery store but she still wanted to quit and work with Will at the theater. Hank had called and talked to Billy for *twenty* minutes; Bill's car was gonna go into the shop soon so he had to figure out how to get to his welding class.

"You can take my car if you want," Steve said.

Bill made a face. "Nah, you need it."

"It doesn't matter. It'd just be a couple hours a week."

"I'll figure somethin' out." Steve hadn't really expected him to say okay. Bill almost never let anyone help him even if it was over something dumb and easy.

"Well, how'd your class go?" Steve asked him.

"It was okay, we ain't even do shit yet. Just talked to people. More papers."

"Billy met a gay girl!" Max piped up from the backseat.

"What, really?" Steve asked. "In your class?"

"Yeah," Bill said; he was brimming with information as usual.

"How do you know she's gay?"

"Had half her head shaved and she got one'a those pink triangles or whatever on her backpack."

Huh. "Oh, okay," Steve said.

"Seems all right. She's older. Lives in the city, has a weird name," Bill said and then didn't tell him the name. "Hey, I also met this guy who had a *really* sweet fuckin' Mustang," Bill told him. "It was a '68, real souped up engine."

That was so interesting. "How old is he? What does he look like?" Billy laughed at him like he was being funny and turned the radio up.

Steve stopped at the convenience store outside of town to get Max

and him sodas for the drive. He leaned over into the passenger-side window. "You want anything?" he asked Bill.

"I'm good."

"Billy didn't eat all day, he was too nervous for tonight," Max informed Steve.

Bill looked like he wanted to strangle her and squeeze her brains out of her nose like spaghetti. "NO I FUCKING WASN'T," he said all cranky.

"Bill, do I make you nervous?" Steve asked him in delight; Bill looked like he wanted to kill him too.

Jesus, it was so great. Steve got him some chips anyway.

They got onto the Interstate and Max rolled all the windows down (so much for Steve's hair not being big). There weren't too many cars on the road, and it looked like it was going to be a nice night. It'd been raining earlier but the clouds had broke; the sun was orange and the sky was blue-pink. *Pretty*, El would say.

Steve felt good, even though his hair was big now and he had his loser glasses on. He took exit nine and turned left at the fork. They had to take a detour but he knew Logansport pretty well. "Road work ahead?" he read the sign out. "I sure hope it does!"

Max moaned loudly like he was killin' her and Bill laughed into his chips. "Oh my *god!* Make him stop!"

"Can't," Bill said.

"I was readin' the sign," Steve told her. Max made her goldfish face in the rearview mirror at him.

It was quarter to six by the time they got into the city; Steve drove around and meandered down some side-streets for a while as Max heckled him about where to park. Down by the river-walk she bounded out of the car with a quarter from Bill to feed the parking meter.

“You ready?” Steve asked him.

“Yeah, let's go.”

Steve leaned over and opened up his door for him; Bill gave him a look like he wanted to murder him again and Steve smiled. It was too good.

They wandered up the street further into the city; Max bounced along far ahead of them pointing out more stores that she wanted to go into on the way back. Steve'd thought maybe she'd dress up to go into town but she was just wearin' her shorty-shorts and probably the ugliest tie-dye shirt he'd ever seen in his life.

“YO, SHITHEAD, STAY WHERE I CAN SEE YOU!” Bill yelled his head off like a grumpy uncle; Max ignored him and bounded away even further. “Fuckin' Christ.”

“She's fine, can't miss her in that shirt,” Steve told him.

Indianapolis was a pretty big city, but Steve guessed they were in the shopping district or the tourist part, right along the canal. He and Bill had been around here before but not really by the river or the state park. Probably Max would have a lot of fun at the zoo; it was nice around here. Everything was all decked out for summer and there were a lot of people out on the streets, young people like them and older people and kids. It was Saturday night. You could hear music in all directions and everything smelled like pot.

Over by the crowded pier they were selling tickets for all the music shows. Steve didn't really think it'd matter if you paid or not – there wasn't much security around – but he got them their slips anyway. He thought maybe they'd stamp your hand or something. It was more like a courtesy thing he figured.

Bill leaned up against the streetlight close to them and watched Steve buy the tickets. He was giving him total sex-eyes; Steve was gonna drop his wallet on the ground like a moron. “You wanna go check 'em out?” he asked when Steve gave him his ticket.

“Sure, if you want.” Steve knew what he wanted to do. The city was

dumb; they should go somewhere private.

“STEVE, DID YOU GET US TICKETS?” Max popped up in two seconds to totally destroy his sex drive. “THERE’S A LED ZEPPELIN COVER BAND THAT’S GONNA PLAY!”

“Really? Where they at?” Bill looked like an excited little dork.

“They don’t go on til like nine.”

“Okay. Enough time to get wasted.” He pulled Steve off down the street.

Steve really couldn’t buy Billy any booze with his baby face; Bill laughed at him and took his wallet. He walked into the same tavern that Steve had just been in and came back out with two beers. “They ain’t really have anything good.” He handed Steve a Keystone.

“Man, how do they not card you?”

“Attitude, I guess.” Bill was drinkin’ his beer; across the street Max was poking around looking at a t-shirt display. “Just look pissed off, I know that’s hard for you.” Bill was hilarious. “I’m not really gonna get drunk, I want to remember this,” Billy told him. “Thanks for takin’ me out here.”

Steve really wished he could touch him. He felt all stupid again. “Yeah, of course. We can go out again,” he said like a dummy. “Whatever you want.”

Bill got his nice slow smile on his face like Steve was saying something funny. Jesus he was really hot. “Thought you were gonna buy me some food.”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, let’s go.” Technically he’d had two lunches today but now it was time for first dinner.

Steve let Max and Bill drag him around. The docks and the river were on one side of the walkway and the shops and cafes were on the other all the way down to 11th street; the three of them zigzagged back and forth half a dozen times checking everything out. Max was making Bill laugh and Bill was making Steve laugh and he felt good.

He gave Bill a big look when 'These Dreams' by Heart came playing over some speakers and Max choked on her hot dog snorting at him.

“You guys are stupid, just go back to the car and kiss already.”

“That's like eight blocks away.”

They ate a lot of food and then as it was gettin' to be night Bill dragged him back down to the pier. He was touching Steve a lot but it wasn't like some big thing. He'd always done that before too and Steve'd told himself not to think about it too much. He always had an arm thrown across Steve's shoulder or a hand in his hair messing it up.

He'd been a little worried about going out with Bill, but it had been dumb to be worried. He'd just wanted Billy to have a good time and by now he'd kinda realized the best way to do that was to let Bill do whatever he wanted; he drank five beers and said he wasn't drunk, then led Steve and Max through five docks talkin' shit about how all the music was total crap.

It was dark out now but the streets were bright. The sidewalk was freshly paved out where the shops ended and there were big paper lanterns strung up. A block down, where the river met the canal, there was a big boat port; Billy and Max clung to the fence and looked at all the fancy yachts. “We should go check 'em out,” Bill said.

“I think you need, like, a keycard to get in,” Steve said; Bill and Max were already climbing the fence. “Or that,” Steve said. It was less crowded down here and no one was payin' attention to them anyway. He climbed the fence too.

Out on the winding docks of the harbor there were a few clusters of people but no one paid them much mind. Billy and Max spent a while gushing over this little speed boat that Steve didn't think was some kind of big deal. He watched their hair change colors against the flashing lights out on the water. They circled around a swanky houseboat; thankfully Billy didn't try to climb on that. Really Bill could do whatever he wanted, but it'd be cool if he could not get arrested on the one night that Steve took him out.

"You guys ever been out on a boat like that?" Steve asked them. He knew they hadn't been far from the beach back in Cali.

Bill was squinting and making a stupid face at his half-empty beer bottle. He tilted it sideways and looked through it, as you did when you were drunk. "Not officially," he said slowly.

"Not officially, what the hell does that mean?"

"That means he had a lot of coke on him," Max said; Bill cackled like a hyena and sat down on the dock.

"No it fucking doesn't." He lit up a cigarette and looked at Steve. "I snuck on one for like an hour with my, with two of my friends. Just for like an hour." He added, to Max, "You asshole."

"Okay, sorry!" She jumped and sat down beside him. "*One time* it's not about drugs."

Max had told Steve before that whenever Billy would get pissed off back at home, like at their parents or at his girlfriend Tracey, he'd go off on a bender and basically disappear for a day or so at a time. Steve'd never really thought about how she felt about it before.

Billy looked like he was thinkin' about it too. "Yeah, well. I don't do that shit anymore, do I?"

"I guess not."

Steve sat down beside him and Bill gave him a cigarette. "I never really been out on the water or anything," he said. He lit Steve's cigarette. "Looks so cool on the tv and shit."

"Yeah, it does." Steve's aunt had two boats and he knew how to drive them. One wasn't as big as the houseboat but it was pretty big. He guessed that could be a surprise for them if they really went out to Lake Michigan.

More people were heading over so they got up to leave. Back at the gate there were two older guys with name-tags and shirts from the harbor standing outside the fence; Steve and Billy both stared like dummies.

Max rolled her eyes. "Oh, my god, are you serious? You just buzz to be let out, idiots." She smacked a button on the side of the gate and the fence creaked opened. Then she waved her hands in their faces. "Situational awareness, guys!" Bill laughed his ass off at her and she stalked off all proud.

Back up the street they went. More musicians were starting to play now; Billy threw an arm around Steve and led him through the crowds. They found the Led Zeppelin cover band and Bill situated him at a spot he liked by the pier by putting both hands on Steve's shoulders and pushing him against a streetlamp. He situated Max by doing the same thing. "I'll be right back, you want something?"

"No, I'm good." Bill stared at him so Steve gave him his wallet; Billy beamed like a kid and took off.

Max was giving him a big look. All of the smog from the city had curled her hair and in the yellow glow of the streetlight her eyes looked green. "Are you having fun or do you want to bail?" she asked him. She looked like it was a test or something.

"What, I'm great," Steve said; Max raised her eyebrows.

"Your glasses are all smudged," she told him. She rolled her eyes over to the stage that'd been set up on the big dock to watch the band start to play. Steve had no clue if it was a Led Zeppelin song or not.

After a couple minutes Bill came back with more beers. When he went to press one into Steve's hand, Steve reminded him, "I'm driving."

"Okay, your loss." Bill looked nonplussed. He handed it over to Max.

Steve almost managed not to make a comment, but then he had to be a Den Dad. "Bill, really?"

"What? It's just a Corona." Max was making a terrible face drinking it anyway.

Steve thought the band sounded pretty good, but Bill said they were just okay. He dragged Steve and Max around gettin' them closer to the stage anyway. There were a lot of people smoking and drinking

even though you weren't really supposed to be smoking or drinking and everyone was pressed together. Bill put his hand on Steve's ass three times and made him feel all stupid. During 'Stairway to Heaven' he got real close to him and slung both his arms around Steve's shoulders, just for a minute.

"I don't want you to fall in the water," he murmured; his mouth was real close to Steve's ear. Then he said, "YO! STOP DANCING LIKE A HOOKER!" to Max. It was a great song.

"Give a girl one beer," Steve said so Max came over to kick him. "No, stop! Come on, I bought that!"

They really didn't stay out too late because Steve had told Bill that his mom wanted him home and Max'd said she wanted to stay at Bev's place for the night. It was half-past ten when they wandered away past the crowds and headed back to the car. There were less people on the side-streets; Steve's ears were ringing from being right by the big speaker.

Billy looked so good and Steve wanted to touch him again, he wanted to kiss him. It sucked that they couldn't do that out here. He felt all dumb from hearing the music and looking at him and havin' Bill put his arms around him. Billy had said before that Steve got off on hooking up in public or whatever but it wasn't really like that. He just always wanted to touch Bill or kiss him and know that they were together. That shit was so corny to say though. Steve almost walked into a frickin' fire hydrant looking at him.

The little street that Steve had parked on had some shops on it too but most of them were shut down for the night already. At one corner of the road there was an empty garden lot with a wooden fence around it and on the other side there was a little record shop with huge windows and its bright lights still on. Max said she wanted to look so they went on in.

The AC blasted at them when they walked in. The record store was a decent size but it was crowded with about ten rows of records and tapes. Fluorescent lights buzzed up above and two of the walls were painted lime green. There were a buncha records and posters up on the walls and 'Rainbow in the Dark' by Ronnie James Dio was

playing; Steve only knew who that was because Bill had yelled his head off at him once for four minutes for not knowin' about Dio. The back wall had a bunch of t-shirts and jewelry on it and Max made a beeline right for it.

Steve followed Bill around as he looked at records. The cashier up front had a pierced nose and hair dyed blacker than a raven's wing; her eyes followed Billy all over the store.

Bill scoffed and dragged Steve further towards the back. "Thinks I'm gonna hawk a buncha tapes or some shit," he muttered.

Bill was so dumb sometimes. "Yeah, I don't think so, man."

They looked at records for a couple minutes; Bill kept putting vinyls in his face like he expected Steve to know who they were. He picked up a record by The Cure and looked at it. Steve actually did know who they were.

"Ooh, does that have 'Inbetween Days' on it?" Steve asked him. "I like that one." He sang two lines, not quietly.

"Thanks, I don't want it anymore," Bill said immediately.

Steve laughed. "I forgot how much you liked my voice," he said; Billy rolled his eyes and walked away from him. He still bought the record though.

Steve watched the chick at the counter make eyes at Bill as he counted out his dollars. Really she could close up shop and go away at any time.

Max was still lookin' at shirts and jewelry so Billy told her they'd wait for her outside. They went across the empty street together and sat braced up against the wooden fence to watch Max in the big window of the shop.

"That girl in there really liked you," Steve told Billy.

Bill looked totally blank. "No she didn't."

"Okay, I'm just saying." Bill gave him another smoke and they lit up.

Billy started talking a lot which was nice; sometimes he barely talked at all and Steve kinda felt like he had to say a lot of bullshit to make up for it. He thought maybe that was annoying.

He looked at Billy while he was talking. He had these really great arm muscles; Steve always just looked the same no matter how much he worked out. Bill's hair was so curly and his eyelashes looked dark like a girl's again in the stream of the overhead light from the record shop. He was wearing two rings on his right hand and he had on this bracelet that'd been his mom's too. Three of his fingernails were painted black; he was so weird.

"Yo, are you listenin' to me?" Bill demanded. He flicked some ash from his cigarette at Steve.

"Yeah, I sure am."

"I dunno." Bill told him about how boring his class was and doin' his laundry with Donna the waitress; he seemed to like her. He said her husband had cheated on her a couple years back and she'd moved out and that was why she was livin' in a dump.

"Shut up, your place isn't a dump," Steve said.

Bill ignored him. "Should paint the kitchen or somethin', El-or-Jane likes yellow," he said. He said that Dustin needed to stop bringing shit over because he didn't have any room for more books. Hank had called him and bugged him about going to his graduation; it was on Tuesday night. He got to start work at the auto shop again on Monday and Steve could tell he was real pumped up about it. He needed to start working out again; he was gettin' too soft.

"Yeah, I noticed you only got like a six-pack instead of an eight-pack now, I been meanin' to mention that."

"Fuck you," Bill said without missing a beat. He said that he thought from the train tracks back to the park was about a mile; he should start jogging again. Steve said he'd ride his bike with him if he wanted. "I seen a lot of dogs at that park, you should bring Luke and Leia."

They watched Max pay for her tapes and shirt and talk to the cashier for a couple minutes. She came out clutching her bags and crossed the street with a weird look on her face.

“What you get?” Bill asked her.

“They had that Joy Division shirt I wanted with the waves on it,” Max said. She was holdin' her shopping bag in one hand and she had a piece of looseleaf paper in the other. She made a face like she'd tasted a sour lemon and handed it over to Bill. “*This* is for you.”

“S'that?”

“I think it's that register girl's phone number, she asked if you or Steve were my *boyfriends!*” Max looked like she was dyin'.

“Told you,” Steve said.

Bill looked delighted. He cackled and unfolded the paper. He looked like a kid sitting cross-legged on the pavement. “Ve-ron-i-ca,” he read out like an asshole and laughed some more. “Hahahaha.” He started foldin' it up again.

“What are you gonna do with it?” Steve asked him; Bill ignored him. He folded the looseleaf up into a paper airplane and sent it flyin' off into the grass behind them.

“BILLY!” yelled Max. “She's probably still looking at us!”

“Good, I'm with someone,” Bill told her. “Ready to go or what?”

Max said she was ready to go. She had another weird look on her face but she didn't say anything else; she bounded ahead of them back to the car as Bill hollered at her not to go too far.

In the car he reeled Steve in by his shirt collar and kissed him real sloppy; Max wailed her head off. “Oh my god, can you just wait? I'm not even going to be home!”

“Stevie's goin' home too, I gotta get it in now,” Bill told her.

Jesus. He couldn't believe Bill had really kissed him right out there in

the car – they'd never done something like that before. It was dark and all and no one was around but still. Steve felt all stupid again, like he was in a romance movie or a Disney movie (even with Max makin' a face in the backseat). “Uh, I can come in for a while,” he said. Max imitated him in a stupid voice so he backed his seat up into her knees.

Traffic was pretty bad getting out of the city, but the roads were clear once they hit the Interstate. It didn't take long to get back home. Steve dropped Max off in front of Beverly's apartment and they watched her go on up into the building. Then they got back to Bill's place and Steve walked him up.

Billy was unlocking the door. “You comin' in for a minute?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Bill let him in and gave him a drink. He kissed him at the counter and almost spilled water all over them. Steve sat on the couch while he closed up the fridge. There was a bunch of mail on the coffee table that he hadn't noticed before; he recognized the school's address right away. “Hey, did you get your report card?”

Billy flopped down next to him. “Yeah, Max brought 'em over here so her moms wouldn't get the note from her science teacher. You wanna see mine?”

No, more kissing! he almost yelled like a caveman. There was a lot of stuff Bill had that Steve wanted to see but he guessed the report card was one of them. “Yeah, of course.” Bill handed it over.

It was a better report card than Steve'd ever gotten: Bill had gotten all B's and an A in English. The A in English was awesome but the B in math made Steve feel all proud or happy or whatever. Billy hated math even more than he did; back at the start of the year he'd said that gettin' C's or D's would keep his old man off his back. He'd been working and everything too and hooking up with Steve. It was just really great.

“This is really awesome man, you did really great,” Steve told him. “I told you you could get an A.”

“Guess you did.”

“So does that mean you actually wrote your research paper? What'd you get on it?”

“Uh, not sure yet. She said she wasn't gonna dock me for bein' late. Think she's gonna send 'em out next week. What, you wanna read it?”

“Maybe,” Steve said. It'd probably take him all summer to do it. “I bet you aced it.”

“Yeah, you remember what you told me if I got an A?”

Steve felt silly again; he definitely remembered. “Yeah, do you know what you want?” Jesus, he thought, please let it be a sex thing.

Billy gave him his real nice smile again. It was totally going to be a sex thing. “I didn't decide yet.”

“Okay, I guess you have time.” They kissed again and Bill put his hand in Steve's hair. He tasted so good even though he also tasted like a beer. He pulled Steve onto his lap and Steve could feel how hard he was. He kissed the side of Bill's neck and started unbuttoning his shirt.

Billy kissed him again. He had a hand on the back of Steve's neck. “Gonna be here all night if you start that shit,” he said.

“It doesn't matter, I can stay.” The shirt had so many buttons.

“Thought you wanted to see your mom,” Bill said, kind of sharply, so Steve knew he had to go home. He always felt like crap talking about his mom in front of Billy, like he might get upset or something. He wouldn't want Steve to ditch out on his mom.

“Okay, okay. I'm going.” He climbed off Bill's lap but then they kissed some more. “Are you gonna be okay here by yourself?”

He thought Billy might make fun of him but he didn't. “Yeah, I'll be alright. Come over tomorrow.”

“Sure, I will. Hey, my mom said she wants you guys to come over

again next week. If you want.” Bill said okay. Steve told him, “Her stupid party’s like the last week in July, you can go to that if you want. Lots of people there to make fun of me. My asshole dad will make an appearance, think it’s on a Sunday.”

“If you want me to go.”

“Uh, we could, we can go camping like the week after that, take off like a Friday or something. I’ll need to recover from the party.”

Bill had his face on that said Steve was being funny; Steve was trying to be funny so that was okay. “Yeah, we can do that.”

“Do you think you can take off?”

“Already asked Hank when he was fuckin’ gabbing at me for an hour. I just need to know the date or whatever.”

“Okay, cool. We can figure it out later.”

They made out some more, and then Steve really had to go before he got all horny and stupid again. Bill kissed him at the door three times and Steve wandered down the stairs in a big daze.

He really wanted to stay over and do sexy stuff but it was kind of nice to go out and get the goodnight kiss and all that stuff. It felt like the real romantic stuff, like how it was supposed to feel. He was pretty sure he had a big stupid grin on his face.

It was almost midnight but he was pretty sure his mom would still be awake; she was always up when there was booze to drink. Really she and Bill had so much in common. Steve would have to fix his hair in the car so it didn’t look like he’d been makin’ out with someone for twenty minutes.

Out on the front steps of the apartment building Donna the waitress was sitting and smoking a cigarette in her work dress; she said hey and then looked up and gave him a big look. Steve watched her take a drag off her cigarette and start smiling. “Nice night,” she said.

“Sure is,” Steve said.

9. Chapter Nine

Summary for the Chapter:

Dust lit an M80 and tossed it into the grass. "Rebecca, this is what my heart does when it sees you!" he said. The firecracker fizzled out and died. Dustin's face fell.

Mike started laughing into his root beer. "You turd!"

"BILLY! WHY'D YOU GIVE ME A DUD?"

"Jesus Christ, just take another one." Bill tossed it at him.

CRACK! went the cherry bomb. "HAHAHAHA!" said Billy; "AUGH!" said Mike.

"THAT WAS RIGHT BY MY FOOT, YOU DOUCHEBAG!" screamed Dustin.

Chapter Nine

Bill graduated and it wasn't some big thing like he'd been worried about. All in all it took about two hours.

Steve could tell that Billy had been worried about it because he'd been even crankier than usual. Like way crankier. On Monday afternoon he'd been majorly grumpy and by Tuesday he was practically monosyllabic; graduation was on Wednesday night. He'd told Steve five times in three days that he didn't even have to show up if he didn't want to.

Bill said he wasn't nervous but he was so obvious. He'd slugged Steve pretty hard in the shoulder when Steve had asked if he should buy him a graduation present, and when he finally gave Steve the pass for the ceremony it'd been folded up like sixteen times.

“Billy! Why'd you do that to it?” Max had squawked her head off on Wednesday morning. “He probably can't even use it like that!”

“Oh yeah? Guess what, I don't care if he frickin' uses it,” Bill had gone off grumbling and snarling and slamming his coffee mug around. He was so funny.

Steve didn't think it mattered if you used the ticket or not. They were mostly for show, he guessed; something for the graduates and to make the families feel important. He thought everybody got like four of them or something. It didn't matter because more people always showed up anyway.

The ceremony was out on the football field and it didn't take that long – the high school wasn't too big anymore. Until Steve had been a freshman, kids from Marietta and South Bend had gone to Hawkins too, but they'd been mainstreamed into Marion County High when it had opened up in '83. It'd probably be cool to go to a brand new school. Last year when Steve had graduated there'd only been about a hundred kids in the senior class; this year there was a few less.

Steve remembered graduation practices – they were really boring and you had to sit out in the hot sun for like four hours and they gave you these really stale cookies. Bill had been bitching about that for the last three days too.

Out where the chairs had been set up Steve got to sit with Max and Susan; Dustin huffed and puffed his way over to them a few moments later.

Bill's dad hadn't shown and no one was really talking about that. Max had said he'd had to work and Billy hadn't said anything at all. His boss from the autobody shop had come instead; he was sitting next to Susan.

Steve had come straight from work so he felt a little silly in his blue striped shirt and tie. But then he felt less silly since Max was wearing a dress (purple) and Dustin was wearing a tie too (green-and-yellow). “Steve, we look so fancy,” Dust lisped at him. His hair was slicked down and it looked weird. “I scored one of Nancy's tickets, but I'm really here for Billy.”

“That's really nice, I bet he appreciates it.”

“Probably not,” Max said wisely; Dustin grinned at her.

Susan was leaning over Max to touch Steve's arm. She gave him a piece of gum; Steve thought she was a nice mom. “Do you see Billy? He wouldn't even tell me what row he's in.”

Steve scanned the rows of graduates up ahead until he found Bill. He looked sweaty and irritated in his maroon gown which was about what Steve had expected. He was wearing his grey jeans and had his scuffed-up combat boots on. In the chair ahead of him was Angela Davis. Bill kept leaning forward to talk to her and she'd laugh at whatever he was saying.

“HEY BILL!” Bill's boss Hank yelled out like a megaphone. Susan winced. “OVER HERE!”

Billy froze, horrified, and gazed into the crowd. Hank waved happily; Steve and Dustin did too. Bill stared some more like he was in a slasher flick, then reluctantly raised a hand and dropped it.

Hank laughed his loud laugh – Steve'd only heard him laugh about five times but somehow he felt like he'd been hearing it his whole life; Hank was that kind of guy – and wiped his forehead off with a little towel. Old guys always had those. “Shit. Look at 'im actin' all embarrassed like he ain't give me the ticket,” he said jovially.

The valedictorian gave her speech; it was this girl named Barbara Kelley and Steve didn't know her. He was kinda surprised it wasn't Nancy or something. But he would have heard about it if it was going to be Nancy, he guessed. Then the principal came up to the stage and gave a speech too. Finally they started calling out names.

“Steve!” Dust whispered urgently. “Where'd you get gum?”

“Shut up!” hissed Max.

Jonathan Byers was one of the first kids called — Steve was pretty sure the woman crying loudly from somewhere behind him was Joyce. Bill went up and got his diploma too. His ears stuck out on the sides of the stupid cap and it made Steve smile. He didn't cause a fuss

or punch anybody; he did scowl really hard when Steve and Dustin whistled loudly though. Bill was really funny.

Susan was crying a little too so Hank gave her his towel (Max made a great face).

“He didn't even flip anyone off,” she said weepily.

“I know, what's wrong with him?” Dust said in disappointment. Steve cuffed him on the back of the head and he laughed.

Nance graduated too and so did a couple other kids that Steve had known from the swim team and the basketball team. Everything got nuts for a couple minutes once it was done and the crowds broke up; Steve went looking for Billy and found Eleven wandering around by herself in another puffy dress.

“Hey, is Hop with you?”

El took his hand like a little kid and Steve felt weird as shit. “He's going to come and get me later.”

Really Steve thought it was so great that everyone seemed to think it was cool to let the traumatized telekinetic kid wander around by herself. “Uh, okay, you can get a ride with me.”

Dustin came up laughing like a little asshole and took Steve's other hand. “Are we going to Billy's big party? Max said that his boss is going to make cheeseburgers.”

“Get the hell off me, I'm not kidding,” Steve commanded. El and Dustin dragged him off.

At Bill's house, his stepmom was already burning something in the kitchen somehow. Steve found Max and Beverly with Will out on the front steps sharing a cigarette. Will looked a little green from it.

“Hey El,” Max said; the girls ignored Dustin. She made a face up at Steve. “What, you didn't go to *Nancy's* house?” She'd been in a mood with him since Monday when she'd found out he'd got a card for Nance. It didn't matter or anything – it was nice to do that stuff. He'd just given it to Mike to give to her.

Steve ignored her little attitude; she'd been the one to tell him that he shouldn't get Bill a big present. He'd been thinking about these Metallica tickets – the ones for the concert in Indianapolis that Max and Bill had had their little bet over had already gone on sale and sold out, but there was another show out in Cincinnati in a couple of months.

He thought it would be fun or cute or something if he got Bill the tickets. It was definitely something he'd like and it would be nice. They could go together like Bill had won his bet. Or lost it; Steve wasn't really sure what the rules had been. But he was also pretty sure that doing something like that might freak Billy out, even before Max had said it. Tickets weren't cheap and Bill was real weird about stuff like that. Plus they'd just been on that big date and all. If Steve did two nice things so close together, Bill might leave the country.

"Where's your brother at?" He was pretty sure Bill hadn't left the country yet.

"I think he's inside helping my mom." Max took a final drag off the cigarette and coughed and choked; she was so cool.

Inside the house there were more kids around than Steve had expected, especially since Bill had bitched his head off about this too and said he probably wasn't even gonna show up. There were a couple guys from the basketball team that Steve remembered and two girls he didn't know. Jonathan Byers was sitting on the faded couch in the living room and reading a book like a weird person; Billy probably loved that. Steve said hey to him anyway.

Jonathan actually looked up from his book. "Hey, what's up?" He was way better at the greeting thing than he'd been a year ago.

Steve tried to think of a tactful way to ask him what he was doing here. "You didn't go to Nancy's party either?"

Jonathan smiled his watery smile. Steve had heard that phrase before and he didn't know how a smile could be watery but that's what Jonathan's was. "Yeah, I'm still *persona non grata* around there."

Steve almost knew what that was. "I hear ya."

"I just came over to drop Will off, some lady grabbed me. I think Max's mom. There's cookies in the kitchen." Jonathan turned back to his book.

Oh! Food. Steve headed on into the kitchen. Mrs. Mayfield was in there with Dustin's mom and they were talking at each other over by the stove. Bill was leaning at the counter eating chips and talking to Lucas (a really weird sight, especially in Billy's house) and one of the guys from the basketball team. They had a couple comics in front of them.

Bill looked up and smiled when he saw Steve. His face was kind of red, probably from sitting out on the football field for three hours.

"Hey, you made it," he said. "I ain't know if you was coming here."

"Yeah, of course I would," Steve said. He was trying not to be too gay or whatever since there were so many other people around. It was kind of weird to not be alone with Billy for once, or just off with the kids. He couldn't really do what he wanted right now. "Congrats, man, how do you feel?"

"Annoyed I guess."

"Max's mom made these cookies, we're all scared to try them," Lucas informed Steve.

"I hear you over there, Lucas Sinclair," Susan said placidly; Lucas blanched. "I want you to know Maxine supervised me."

"Yeah, that doesn't mean nothin'," Billy muttered.

"I hear you too, Billy." Bill made a face too.

"I'll eat them," Steve said. He felt really brave even though Susan's stuff wasn't as bad as Bill or Max went on about. The cookies were chocolate chip and they were a little salty but not bad; Steve ate four and then Bill pulled him way.

"You're gonna get sick eating that shit she made."

"They're not that bad."

Billy rolled his eyes. He looked out through the kitchen doorway and then made a face at Jonathan sitting on the couch; he looked like a little kid. "Jesus Christ, he's still fuckin' here?" He made an even bigger face and his eyes narrowed. "Is that my *goddamn book*?" he whispered.

Steve grabbed Bill's arm before he could launch himself into the living room. "You should be nice, he might have got you a present." Billy actually snarled and Steve wanted to laugh. "Hey, I'm sorry I didn't get you something. I didn't know if you'd want me to."

"That's okay, I don't need anything. Thanks for coming out here and all."

"Yeah, of course." They stared at each other; Steve wondered if they were having a moment. "I – "

"BILL!" Hank said from somewhere behind them. "WHERE'D YOUR CAP AND GOWN GO? COME OVER HERE!" Billy's eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

"This shit's so fuckin' embarrassing," he muttered. He shook Steve's arm off and stalked away; it was so good. Steve watched him storm through the kitchen and go out to the side of the house to talk to his boss.

Hank had brought a case of Miller Lite and Susan was turning a blind eye to it; actually maybe she was getting drunk. Billy got less annoyed and embarrassed after about four beers. Four-beer-Billy was fun – five beers and he might be a little too much fun. It was funny to see Billy get all stupid after a couple of beers. Really, neither of them had been drinking too much lately.

In the living room Billy put the baseball game on so that he wouldn't have to talk to Jonathan, and they hung out with Max and Will and Dustin and Lucas. Angela Davis came over with a cake.

Steve watched them talking at the front door for a long time; the sky was turning to dusk. Jonathan leaned over a little which Steve unfortunately guessed meant he wanted to talk. He looked up.

“Hey, um, I know we're not ... “ Jonathan stopped and stared at him. “Have you talked to Nancy at all lately?”

“Not really, why?” Steve felt a little frightened. He remembered suddenly that Nancy knew certain very sensitive information about him and Bill. He didn't think she would have told Jonathan about it but she might. That might make things – well, definitely awkward. Steve didn't like feeling that it was bad or awkward but it wasn't anybody's business. “What's up? Did she say something to you?”

“Yeah, she just asked me about you. She said that she wanted you to call her. If I saw you.”

“Oh. Okay.” That was okay, Steve guessed. He needed to stop forgetting about calling her. And yep it was definitely still weird to talk about Nancy with Jonathan. Steve didn't care about her like that anymore but it was still weird. “Yeah, I will.”

“Okay.” Jonathan stared across the room, too, at Bill and Angela talking. “I didn't think those two were friends.”

“Yeah, it's pretty weird.” Angela was Nancy's friend – not her best friend or anything but still her friend. Steve and Nance had gone over and fed her pets a couple years ago when she'd been on vacation with her family.

Angela being friends with Nancy pretty much meant that she was supposed to be exactly the kinda girl that Bill didn't like. It *was* just weird that they were friends, or that they even talked to each other.

Not that Steve was jealous, you know. “They had a class together or something.”

“Oh. Huh.” Jonathan stared some more. “Didn't they have like a thing back in March?”

“Uh, yeah, that's not true,” Steve snapped. Okay maybe he was a little jealous.

“It's just what I heard.”

Steve didn't answer him for a few seconds. “I need more food, do you

want something?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Steve ate more cookies and then Angela left so he could stop feeling like a jealous boyfriend or whatever. It was totally stupid; Bill was gonna laugh at him. By nine-thirty there were less people around and Bill sat with him and El and Max on the couch. He’d had his fifth beer by then which meant he was laughing a lot and he kept putting his arms around the girls.

At a little past ten Hopper appeared to collect Eleven; he sent her off to thank Mrs. Mayfield and he and Billy went out on the porch. They were out there for a while, a long time. When Max and Steve got up and (discreetly) tried to look out the window, Hopper glared at them and tipped his hat like a cowboy.

El had a big plate of questionable food wrapped up from Max’s mom and she waved goodbye to Steve and Max and Will, a little unsteady. When she went outside Bill came back in; he had a big file folder full of papers for some reason.

“What’s that?” Max asked suspiciously. Will looked at him too.

Bill put the folder behind his back like a little dork, because he’d had six beers. “What? Nothing.”

“You never tell me anything.” She was scowling.

“Yeah, whatever, it’s about that great vacation I just took, what you wanna know about it?”

Max’s face softened and she looked guilty. “Sorry,” she said quietly.

Bill sat on the couch and sat on the papers like a drunk nerd. They watched the rest of the game and then Steve said he should probably go home soon. His mom was coming home from work late and she wanted him to watch *Dateline* with her at eleven.

“Okay, gimme ten minutes. I’ll walk ya out.” Bill wandered off into the kitchen because he said he wanted to say thanks to Susan.

Steve said bye to Jonathan and Will, who were leaving too. He was really tempted to look at Bill's mystery papers but he stopped himself.

He sat with Max for a while and they discussed the Metallica tickets – Steve guessed she was done being pissed off at him for now. The tickets didn't go on sale for a couple weeks; Max said he should wait to see if they got into a big fight before he bought them.

“Why would we get into a fight?” Steve asked her.

Max gave him a look that said he was dumb but otherwise didn't answer him. “So can I help you get them? Maybe I can go too.”

“Sure, if you want.” It didn't really matter to Steve. It might be fun to have her there anyway, if they really went. “Hey, I think I'm gonna head out, can you say bye to Bill for me?”

“I guess. We're leaving soon anyway,” Max said like she didn't live at home with her mom. She flounced off to the kitchen too.

Steve wandered around until he found his tie – Dust had taken it off him because he'd said they were at the after-party – and peered into the kitchen to see if he could catch Bill's eye or something before he took off.

Billy was sitting sprawled out at the kitchen table and Susan was at the corner of it drinking a Miller Lite in that weird way that all moms had when they drank beer. Whatever he was saying to her was making her laugh a lot. Hank was still there too and he was leaning back against the chipped kitchen counter talking to Max; she grinned at him and bounced a little on the soles of her feet.

“I never said you couldn't take her to see Def Leppard,” Susan was saying.

“Mom, yes you did!” Max squawked.

“Yeah you did, you acted like I was gonna shoot her up with a goddamn eight-ball,” Bill said.

Susan laughed and almost spit out her beer; she covered her mouth. “No I didn't, I did not say that.”

“Bill!” Hank said. “Don't curse in front of your stepmom!” Billy flipped him off.

It was just really cute or whatever, seeing Bill sitting around like that with Max and Susan. Steve decided not to pull him out after all. Billy might want to go back to Steve's house or something and – he should probably stay there. It was nice to be with your family like that sometimes. Well not that Hank was his family or anything but he was nice enough. Bill looked really happy and all.

Steve found his keys on the coffee table and went to the door; it was colder outside than he'd thought. He was just stepping out onto the porch when Bill bounded over to him with his face all flushed. “Hey.” He grabbed Steve's shoulder. “You leavin' me?”

“Oh, yeah. My mom's waiting for me.”

“Sorry man, everybody was talkin' to me. You want me to come with you? We can go somewhere after.”

Oh. Well. Steve did want that. Even so: “No, that's okay. It's your big night and all. You should be with your family.”

Billy made a face and rolled his eyes. He still looked happy though. “Ain't my family,” he said gruffly; Steve wasn't so sure.

“We can do something tomorrow if you're not busy.”

“Yeah, okay.” They were just standing together out on the dark little front steps; Bill leaned back against the wall. “Come over to my place after work if you want.”

“Will do,” Steve said like a nerd; tomorrow was Thursday which meant it was almost Friday. “Did you have a good time tonight?”

“I guess. Thanks for goin' to my stupid graduation.”

“Yeah, I wouldn't miss it,” Steve said. Bill grinned like a shark and pushed him against the screen door, then kissed him hard (their teeth clicked together), just for a second.

“Feels like my fuckin' dad's gonna pop up and kill me with a

machete.”

“I can't believe he didn't show up.” Steve still felt a little dizzy from the kiss and all. It felt like kind of a big deal, and a little dangerous – Bill's boss and his stepmom were right there inside.

“Yeah? Well, I can. 'M glad.” Bill kissed him again, really quick. “Hey, see you tomorrow, okay?”

“See ya.” Steve wandered down the million porch steps in a daze. he could still hear Hank bellowing away in the kitchen.

The end of the week was the Fourth of July which was one of the best holidays in Steve's opinion. On Thursday he went to work early and managed to evade (most of) Linda's questions about his new bisexual lifestyle and they closed the office up at three. Then he went out to Eastgate with Max and Bill and Lucas and they bought a *lot* of firecrackers, also hot dogs. Walmart was the best.

Friday he got to sleep in and he was in the kitchen eating second lunch when Dustin called him up. Dust told him that they were all meeting up at the little park by Billy's place at dusk to shoot off fireworks so Steve should get ready.

“Wait, how did you guys get the park?” Steve asked him. Bill had said last night that they could just light the firecrackers on his balcony. “Don't you have to put in for it through the township. That takes like a month.”

“El said that Hop just said we could have the park.”

“Oh.” Huh. The perks of having the scary sheriff as your adoptive father, Steve guessed.

“Do you want me to come over and help you pick out an outfit? I'm excited for Billy to see your summer wardrobe!” Dustin lisped.

Steve rubbed his eyebrow and stared out of the kitchen window. There had to be some way to stop your kid best friend from saying horrible sentences. He kept eating his sandwich. “Yeah, I think I'm okay, Dustin.”

“Uh, okay, but Rebecca says I have a really good eye for color, my mom says so too,” Dust went on. “Steve, can I say that your skin really pops when you wear certain pastel palettes – “

Jesus H. Why did it have to be pastel? Steve guessed he did have like two or three yellow shirts. “No, no you really can't. Stop talking.”

“Hey, buddy, it's only weird if you make it weird. I'm giving you a compliment!”

“I'm not making it weird, you're making it weird,” Steve told him.

“Steve! Listen, I understand that, because of recent circumstances, aka me being a homophobic jerk, you might now feel uncomfortable talking frankly or displaying affection towards your male friends, but I want you to know that, once again, as your BEST male friend, who is not – “

“Oh, my god,” Steve said around the sandwich. It was so many horrible sentences.

Dustin continued saying them. “As your best male friend, who is NOT in a homosexual relationship with you currently, but still supportive *and* your best male friend – “

“Okay, wow, look – “

“ – I deeply apologize for my former attitude and the way in which I – “

“Dustin, stop talking about the gay thing, I'm serious, I'm not uncomfortable – “ okay he was really uncomfortable.

“I'm not talking about the gay thing, I'm talking about our friendship!”

Jesus H, again. Really Steve had no clue what the hell Dustin was yapping on about half the time. He was totally going to be even worse now because of the gay (bisexual) thing.

“Why are you bringing this up again?” Steve asked him. “I thought we already talked that out.”

“We did, but listen, I was talking to my mom about you – “

Steve stopped eating his sandwich. “WHAT?”

“No, don't worry, I didn't say it was you! I just told her that I had a male friend who is dating another male friend, and don't worry, I specifically said to her, it's *not* Steve OR Billy – “

Billy was going to flip his fucking shit. “Oh, my god, that's really great – “

“And she kinda yelled at me and said that she thought she had raised me to be more open-minded about people who partook in *alternate lifestyles* – “

Steve groaned around his sandwich –

“ – and told me I should mind my own business and that it shouldn't affect me if I'm really friends with this person – again, NOT you OR Billy, I reminded her – “

“Dustin – ”

“What?” Dust said. “So anyway, I just wanna say sorry about how I acted again I guess.”

Dustin's way of apologizing (again) *would* include telling his mom everything and talking about Steve's summer wardrobe. It was only three-thirty but Steve already kind of wanted to lay down again. “Okay, great. It's, it's, that's fine.”

“Is it fine? You're kind of stuttering a lot again, Steve!”

“Yeah. It's fine, just don't fuckin' — talk to your mom about it.”

“What, are you mad?”

“No. I'm not mad.” He made sure to be very concise to show how not-mad he was.

“So ... should I come over and help you pick out an outfit for Billy?”

Steve rubbed at his eyebrow some more, then realized he was probably getting sandwich crumbs all over his face. It felt like this was going to be a really long phone call; they might miss the fireworks. “No, Dustin, we – uh, we don't really do that stuff.”

“Oh. What? Why not?” Dust sounded blank. “Don't you guys go on dates? Max said that you guys went on a date last week and she went too.”

It was really great that all the kids were talking about them. Well, Steve guessed that he wasn't surprised. “Yeah, it wasn't really a big deal – “

“Well, you helped me when I started dating Rebecca, remember? You bought me that tie for the Snow Ball!”

Steve *had* got him the tie for the Snow Ball – it'd been blue. “Look, why don't you, ah – why don't you go help Will with that or something?” He still wasn't even a hundred percent sure that Dust knew about Will but he was pretty sure.

“Steve. Will doesn't have a boyfriend, he has a crush on *your* boyfriend,” Dustin informed him like he was slow.

Okay so he did know. “Thanks, I – “

“I'm not going to help him steal Billy from you! Anyway he has Mike to help him with that stuff.”

Steve felt a little startled. “What? He does?”

“I mean picking out outfits, they've been doing that since like the sixth grade.”

He felt more startled. “Oh. Uh, okay.”

“So should I come over?”

Steve thought about it; he'd just cleaned the house yesterday (he wanted to be at Bill's place this weekend, not his). Whenever Dustin came over he totally wrecked the house. “No, thanks, I'm okay. I don't need to – uh, to like pick out an outfit.”

“Why not? It'll be fun!”

“Okay, well, I – yeah, I mean, I guess I mean, I don't want to do that with *you*,” Steve clarified.

There was a long pause. “Oh. Really? Oh. Okay.” Dust sounded weird now. “That's okay.”

Steve felt kind of bad in two seconds. He just wanted to get Dust to leave him alone and get off the phone. “It's just a barbecue in the park, man.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right.” He sounded all glum and shit.

“Look, are you – “

“You know, Steve, I figured this would happen,” Dustin burst out in a dramatic rush. “That's okay I guess, I mean I'm fine. You know I always kind of felt that our friendship had an expiration date, I guess the time is up. I guess it's finally soured.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Steve started eating his sandwich again.

“You know, Mike has always had Will and they've both known Lucas for longer than they've known me, and then Max and Lucas got together, and became Lumax,” Dustin started going on. Steve didn't know what the fuck Lumax was. “But that was okay and all because then me and you started hanging out! I figured you would start dating somebody again – okay I always thought it would be a girl but whatever – “

“Uh, Dustin – ”

“ – and that you wouldn't want to hang out with me anymore. I figured I would be excluded and I've already dealt with that, but I do feel *really* excluded right now, I just wanna say – “

“Oh, my god, Dustin, come on, man, shut the hell up,” Steve said before Dust could start making him feel even worse.

Did he really feel *excluded*? He couldn't; that was stupid. Maybe he did. Steve guessed he had been kind of ignoring Dustin for Billy a lot

lately, maybe for a while. He hadn't really thought that Dustin minded – he had his new girlfriend and all too. Dust said, “Uh, you don't need to swear at me, Steve.”

“Jesus, I'm not *excluding* y – I, you know what, okay, come over and help me pick out a fucking shirt.”

“Really? Do you mean that? I mean you probably look okay anyway.” He still sounded really depressed.

Steve sighed in resignation. “*Please* come and help me pick out a shirt.”

“Okay!” Dust said. There was a pause. “Uh,” he said. “Hey. So can you come pick me up?”

Steve hung up on him.

Dustin wrecked the house and it took them an hour to pick out a plain t-shirt for Steve to wear. After that they played Missile Command out in the living room and ate first dinner, then Steve picked up Rebecca and drove them all out to Bill's place. Steve parked in front of the apartment complex and he and the kids wandered across the street.

The park by Billy's house was small enough that it didn't really even have a name; it was kind of behind the deli and the Chinese take-out place. It only took up about a quarter-lot. It was never really very crowded — mostly just people from the apartment complex who came out to walk their pets. There was a little field and two picnic benches, a couple of those rickety old grills that were bolted to the ground. It had an old swing-set and the saddest jungle-gym Steve had ever seen in his life.

The rest of the brat pack was already there and Beverly and Max and her mom were grilling hot dogs on one of the little barbecues. Over by the field Billy, Lucas and Mike were lighting off M80s and cherry bombs; Steve was pretty sure both of those were illegal. Mike looked pretty terrified and was clutching a root beer.

Bill was laughing his head off like a hyena. "HEY STEVIE," he said. A firecracker went off and Lucas screamed like a girl.

"Where'd you get that shit?" Steve asked him.

Bill lit a cherry bomb and threw it; Lucas screamed again even though it wasn't near him. From behind him Steve could hear Max laughing.

"Hank gave 'em to me."

El was sitting on the swingset watching them and Will was on the ground drawing patterns in the wood-chips. Off to the side Jonathan was standing around with his hands in his pockets; Steve guessed he was hanging out with them again.

Steve sat on the swings next to El and Will. "Hey guys."

"STEVE, GIVE US YOUR LIGHTER!" Dust yelled. He was getting loud already. Steve tossed it to him.

Rebecca trailed after him with uncertainty. "Dustin, be careful!"

Dust lit an M80 and tossed it into the grass. "Rebecca, this is what my heart does when it sees you!" he said. The firecracker fizzled out and died. Dustin's face fell.

Mike started laughing into his root beer. "You turd!"

"BILLY! WHY'D YOU GIVE ME A DUD?"

"Jesus Christ, just take another one." Bill tossed it at him.

CRACK! went the cherry bomb. "HAHAHAHA!" said Billy; "AUGH!" said Mike.

"THAT WAS RIGHT BY MY FOOT, YOU DOUCHEBAG!" screamed Dustin.

"They're going to blow their fingers off doing that," Will said wisely (Will the Wise – ha!). Billy and Dustin were arguing over Steve's lighter and who should hold it.

Steve looked over at El. "Wouldn't it be easier if you lit 'em up?" he asked. She wasn't a firestarter like in that movie but he was pretty sure she could do just about anything.

El shrugged. "They're having fun."

Everyone lit off the cherry bombs and snappers and snakes until the sun began to set, then Max stomped on over with her hot dog. She gave one to Steve too so Steve guessed she was done being pissed at him. "Billy! We have to do my bottle rocket now!"

"Yeah, where's it at?" Bill was really sweaty from running around setting things on fire and screaming at Dustin. He smacked Steve hard on the back as he passed; Steve almost fell off the swings. "Hey, you okay?" He was really romantic.

"Yeah, I'm good."

Steve sat and ate his hot dog while Max and Bill got her bottle rocket set up – she'd even painted the side and all since they'd got it yesterday. El stared at him eating which was a weird thing that she did. Steve was trying to get used to it. "You doing okay?"

She didn't answer him for a couple seconds, then made a little face. "It's really loud."

It was pretty loud. "Mike can probably get you some sparklers, we got a bunch yesterday." She smiled at him. Max's bottle rocket went off with a loud whistle and El winced. It went really high.

Bill came bounding back over and knocked Steve off his swing and knocked the wind out of him.

"Ow, thanks so much."

"Oh, you're welcome." Bill had him pinned to the ground for a moment. He had his maniac grin on and his hair was falling into his eyes. Steve looked up at him and felt struck; for a second he thought they were going to kiss again or something. "Did you see me light the rocket?" Bill asked like a kid.

"Yeah, it was really great," Steve told him. He added, "Uh, you're on

my spleen.”

Bill pushed halfway off him and sat up in the wood-chips. “You comin’ over to my place later?”

“Sure, if you want.” Tonight was The Night, the big night, Steve had decided. It was time to stop respecting each other – he and Bill were going to hook up and it was going to be good and maybe loud. He didn’t care if any of the Monster Squad thought they were having a party at Bill’s. They were gonna leave by midnight even if Steve had to carry ‘em all down the apartment stairs himself.

Beverly was coming back over to the swings from where she’d been hanging out with Max’s mom for some reason. She had an evil smile on her face. “Okay, I finally thought up a good one! Dustin, put that snapper in your mouth and light it.”

“Yeah, no, that ain’t happenin’, pick another,” Bill told her. He finally sat up fully and climbed off of Steve.

“What? Why?” Dust looked disappointed. “I could totally do that one!”

“Yeah, I ain’t bringin’ you to the fucking emergency room and missing the fireworks, actually there wouldn’t be much left of you to take if you do that dumb sh – “

“I didn’t say let it go off, just light it!” Bev said.

“Billy, I have great reflexes!” Dustin lisped.

“What? Do you?” Steve asked him.

“STOP PICKING ON ME, STEVE!”

“Just pick another one!”

Bev looked disappointed too. “Fine, do the truffle shuffle in front of Ms. Mayfield.”

“Ha!” said Dustin. “That’s way easier, I already did that earlier!” He ran off and Bev trailed after him. Jesus.

“What, are they playing truth or dare?”

“Yeah, they all had a game goin' since this morning,” Bill said. “Was like four kids over before fucking nine'clock, they been real hardcore.”

“I had to put salt in Billy's coffee,” El told Steve.

Billy looked startled, then deeply upset. His brows went way down; it made Steve laugh. “Wait, that was *you*?”

“I'm sorry!”

“Are you playing with them?” Steve asked him.

“Eh, sometimes.” He was getting another bottle rocket set up.

“Sounds like it's been so fun for you.”

“Yeah, I don't care 'bout their dumb shit.” Billy planted the rocket in the ground. “I wanted to hang out with Max.” He glanced up quickly to make sure she hadn't heard him.

Steve felt surprised – well, not that Bill wanted to hang out with his sister but that he'd actually said it; even three months ago he probably wouldn't have. “Really?”

“Sure. We always did something cool during Fourth of July back at home,” Bill told him. “Think, ah, like two years ago was the best one. We snuck out on top of this old warehouse and set off a buncha poppers with two of my friends. My dad beat my ass when I took her home late though.”

“I didn't know you guys did that stuff together.”

Billy lit the rocket and backed up. He sat on Steve's vacated swing next to Eleven. “I told ya, I used to be real cool. Look at her now, she don't even give a shit about me.” He nodded over at to where Max was standing over one by the picnic tables all moony with Lucas.

The bottle rocket went off with another loud whistle and a bang; El clamped her hands over her ears. Bill looked over. “Oh, shit. Sorry,

man. That's my last loud one.”

The kids did a lot of stupid dares and ate a lot of hot dogs. Most of the dares were pretty lame; it was par for the course for the Monster Squad, Steve figured. Anyway Max's mom was around so they couldn't do anything too nuts.

Will had to kiss Beverly (everyone screamed), and then Lucas prank-called Mr. Clarke from the pay phone. Rebecca did a trust-fall off the picnic table and almost squashed Dustin. Billy got dared to pick up Bev, Lucas, and Will, and managed to carry them halfway across the field before they fell over; he was hollering that Beverly threw off his equilibrium.

Bill dared Mike to kiss Eleven for no less than four seconds and Mike turned redder than a tomato. Billy cackled at his face. “What, you ain't gonna get it otherwise.”

“God, you're still *such* a dick!” Mike said. He turned and smushed his red face against El's in the most awkward kiss Steve had ever seen in his life; she was laughing at him. All the kids screamed again.

Bill flopped back down on the grass next to Steve as the rest of the Monster Squad was hooting and hollering. “You embarrassed him,” Steve told him.

“Whatever. Acts like they're fuckin' nine years old, I'm helpin' them out.”

Eleven came and stood over them. Her face was really red too but she didn't exactly look unhappy. “Can I have the sparklers now?”

“Oh. Yeah, hang on.”

They got Mike and El set up with their little sparklers and left them to be romantic off by themselves on the swingset. Steve kind of wanted to be off somewhere being romantic with Billy too; he guessed they couldn't really do that stuff with Bill's stepmom and Jonathan Byers around and people coming and going from the apartment complex. Definitely wouldn't be a good idea for them to kiss for no less than four seconds on the swings.

Once the sun pulled down low in the sky everyone sat around to watch the really big show. They did a fireworks display every year in Wrigley Park and you could see them pretty good from out here; it was only about a mile away. El came back over and sat down beside them. Billy put his arm around her even though Mike made his face that looked like a cat that'd gotten stuck in the dishwasher. Steve guessed some things really didn't change.

Bill lit up a cigarette and handed it over to Steve. The big flash from one of the fireworks lit his face up in purple and white and Steve felt all stupid looking at him for a moment. Then he felt a little less stupid because Dust was right on his other side breathing all heavy like a creep. He smelled like a hot dog.

The fireworks were really nice; Steve hadn't gone and sat out to watch them since he was a kid. He and Nance had been supposed to go the summer they'd been together, but she'd gotten pretty sick and he'd stayed home with her. Anyway it was just nice to see them. He'd really never thought he'd get to do it with Billy of all people.

Once the show was over Max's mom said goodnight to them all and headed back home. She spent a couple minutes lecturing Max and Billy; Steve guessed she was recalling past Independence Days. The kids screwed around at the park for a while longer before Dustin started wailing and moaning that he was hungry. Most of the Monster Squad ran on ahead to invade Bill's apartment and set Steve's sex plans awry. Well, it was only past ten.

Bill was still flopped out on the ground; he sat up and made a face, looking over at where Will and his brother were standing together by the parking lot. "What, do I gotta fuckin' invite that guy over to my place?"

Steve assumed he wasn't talking about Will. "I dunno, I guess it would be nice. He gave Will a ride, right?" Really he didn't think Billy needed to be that nice.

Billy pulled a huge face like a kid. "I guess," he said like he was being killed. "YO! YOU COMING OR WHAT?"

Up in Bill's place Max and Dustin were making a huge mess looking

for snacks in the fridge while the rest of the kids spread out in the living room. Beverly was pulling out a bunch of boardgames that had ended up in the apartment. She gasped loudly. "OOH, BOGGLE!" she said like a nerd; it was Steve's special-edition set. Bill started laughing at her.

Jonathan was poking through a crate of Bill's records that was on the floor by the TV. Steve sat on the couch and felt pretty weird. He felt like – kind of exposed or something with Jonathan there, like there'd be a pair of his boxers thrown over a lampshade even though he and Bill hadn't been doing that kind of stuff lately. Billy made a face at Jonathan's back like he was dying; Max strolled on by with a soda and smacked him in the chest.

The Monster Squad kept on playing their game and Bill gave Steve the remote to turn the TV on. *Tales From the Darkside* was on but the kids were way more entertaining. They watched Lucas put on one of Max's crop tops and do a dance, then Dustin ate a raw egg.

Jonathan pulled out a record that Steve'd never seen before in his life. It had a skeleton watching a TV set. "Oh, wow, man, where'd you get this?"

Bill froze because he'd been in the middle of making another face; for a second he looked truly amazing. "Uh. I think I was at like a flea market back home or somethin'."

"It's really hard to get around here. I didn't know you liked Social Distortion." Steve didn't know what that was.

"Yeah, they're okay." Billy made another horrible face. "You can borrow it if you want."

"Oh. Really?" Jonathan looked surprised. "I mean, that's okay."

"Don't matter to me. I barely listen to that one."

"Oh. Well, I'll be really careful with it. What other stuff do you like? Do you like, uh, Sonic Youth or anything?" Steve didn't know what that was either.

"Max likes 'em. They're okay." Bill and Jonathan started talking about

music and Steve felt like, well, kind of a sulky bitch, as Bill would say. He and Jonathan probably liked a lot of the same weirdo bands; Billy was always making fun of Steve for listening to the top forty. They probably liked the same weirdo books too.

Dustin sat down next to him and broke him out of his thoughts. "Okay, I ate the egg, it's my turn," he announced. "Steve, are you playing yet?"

Steve tried hard not to act like a sulky bitch. "Uh, no. I guess not."

"Okay, well, it's my turn," Dustin said again. "Billy, truth or dare?"

"Nah, I'm done playing that shit."

"But you – "

"Said I'm done playing."

Dust looked disappointed. "Fine! Will, eat that penny off the floor!"

"What? I didn't even pick yet!" Will was laughing.

"Oh right. Truth or dare?"

"Oh, my god, no, he'll get sick!" That was one of the girls.

Will looked thoughtful. "Well, the penny thing doesn't seem that bad." He ate the penny and the girls screamed. "God, I think it had gum on it." He retched and Bill started laughing.

"Okay, okay." Jonathan stood up. "On that note, we really gotta get home."

Will's face fell. "Really?"

"Yeah, do you want Mom to freak out? It's almost eleven."

"Oh, okay." Will glumly got his stuff together. "Bye guys. Bye Billy."

"Uh, wait, you have to pick somebody, or the game dies!" Dust said.

"Oh, right. Um ... I guess, Mike, truth or dare?"

Mike pulled a face. "Truth."

Will thought about it. "Was that really the first time you and El kissed since the Snow Ball?"

Mike was turning the tomato color again. "Maybe."

"Oh my god, that is so sad!" Max said. Bill cackled and Mike scowled.

"Whatever, there was stuff going on!"

"Oh yeah!" Dustin looked around eagerly. "Hey, guys, this is like the anniversary of the first time Billy really met Eleven, isn't that cool?"

Everyone stared at him and his face fell. "What?"

"Man, you don't have to just bring it up like that," Lucas told him.

"What?! I didn't say like since they got kidnapped or whatever!"

"Dustin, shut up," Steve told him.

"Oh my god! Sorry!"

Bill came back over to the couch with a beer. "Whatever."

Everyone stood around for a moment. "Uh, well. Thanks for the record," Jonathan said finally.

"Yeah, bye."

"Bye Billy!" said Will.

"Later kid."

Steve couldn't exactly say he was sad to see Jonathan go. "Hey, are you alright?"

Bill was drinking his beer and watching the TV. "I'm good."

"Okay."

Beverly flopped onto the couch on top of Max and Lucas in a

dramatic way. She put her hand over her face. “Will is kind of a good kisser,” she said; Lucas made a horrible face and Max started laughing a lot.

“Okay, Mike, come on, keep the game going, I have to be home by midnight!” Dustin said.

Mike twisted around awkwardly; he'd been over by the kitchen with El. They came and sat on the floor in front of the TV. “Okay, okay. Max, I'm getting you back for earlier. Truth or dare?”

Max laughed at him. She was holding her soda bottle on her stomach like it was a beer. “What do you think I am, *stupid*? Truth!”

“Make it good, man,” Lucas told him; Max slugged him.

“Okay. Ummm.” Mike thought really hard. His eyebrows flattened out to a straight line; it looked great. “Okay, I got it. So ... okay, what's – oh, no, that doesn't work, sorry Lucas.” He thought some more. “Okay! Max, what's the ... most embarrassing thing you know about Billy that no one else here knows?”

“Mike!” El said.

“What?”

Bill looked up from where he'd been getting closer to Steve on the couch. “S'cuse me? Why's my fuckin' name coming out of your mouth?”

“Oh, what, *now* you're paying attention to what we're doing?”

“Uh, yeah, when I hear my fuckin' name I pay attention.”

Max looked really trapped. She almost upset her soda onto her stomach. She sat up a little and looked around. “That's stupid, that's not fair.”

“Um, is this fair?” Lucas pointed to his crop top; he didn't even have his t-shirt on underneath it.

“Yeah, well, you picked a dare,” Max told him.

“Yeah, well, *you* picked truth.”

Max scowled. “That's not fair! You're just trying to get him mad at me!”

“Yeah, think about what you wanna say,” Bill told her.

“Max, it's just a stupid question, you don't even have to do anything,” Dust said.

“No, don't fuckin' bring me into your kiddie shit,” Bill said.

“Sorry, it *is* the rules, you're a victim by proxy,” Bev told him. “I just had to drink pickle juice and shaving cream.”

“Wait, what?” Steve said. He must have missed that when he'd been glaring at Jonathan.

“Max, you *have* to do it or else you get a triple dog dare!” Dustin told her.

“Yeah, what's the most embarrassing thing you know about Billy?” Mike asked her again.

Max gave him a terrified look; she looked over at Steve and Billy too. “I – I don't know, this is stupid.”

“You're real cute, tryin' to start shit with me,” Bill told Mike.

“I'm not starting anything, it's just the game!”

“Come on, lay off her,” Steve said.

“What? It can't even be that bad, everyone already knows he's in love with Steve!” Dust said.

“Fuck you, man!” Steve said; Dustin laughed and laughed.

Max cringed with Bill glaring at her. “Um. I, I don't know.”

“You *have* to tell,” Lucas told her.

“She doesn't have to tell,” El piped up; Steve had almost forgotten

that she was there. Oh god it was gonna be bad. Or maybe amazing but probably bad. He couldn't tell if he wanted to know or not.

“Max.” Bill's eyes were narrowed dangerously. “Think real hard about the rest of your life, think about what you wanna do here.”

She did spill her soda. “I don't know! I don't want a triple dog dare!”

“Oh my god, it's gonna be so good,” Lucas said. “Just tell us!”

“No, it's stupid!”

“You have to tell us!”

Max yelped. “I don't – okay – I don't know!”

“Max, I swear to god – “

Max covered her face, then uncovered it. “Okay. Billy's – “

“Max.”

“Okay, come on.” Mike was waffling a little bit. “She doesn't really have to say it.”

“Yes she does!”

Max quaked with everyone egging her on. “BILLY'S GIRLFRIEND USED TO PLUCK HIS EYEBROWS!”

There was a long collective silence. Dustin gasped audibly. “*What?*” he asked in thrall.

Bill launched himself off the couch; Max screamed and jumped. “YOU'RE DEAD, MAX!” He flung himself at her and she thundered off to the kitchen.

“I'M SORRY!”

“Oh my god shut up,” Beverly said rapidly. “Are you serious?”

“Wait, *really?*” Steve said.

“IT WAS LIKE ONE FUCKIN' TIME!”

Max leapt behind the back of the couch in the hopes of preserving her life. “NO IT WASN'T!” she yelled like she couldn't stop. “IT WAS LIKE EIGHT TIMES!”

Everyone gasped again; Max was definitely dead. Okay it was really good. “Wait, do you still do it?” Dustin gasped. “Oh my god please say you still do it.”

“Fuck you, no I don't still do it.”

“I don't know,” Lucas said with joy.

“You fuckin' assholes – “

“Hey, man, it's all right, they look really good,” Steve said. He was laughing; he couldn't help it.

“Fuck you,” Billy snarled. His face was really red – it was kind of amazing. “This game's fuckin' over, you little shits.”

Dustin was really red too because he was laughing so much. “That's okay, I got what I needed.” Bill smacked him really hard. “OW! I THOUGHT SHE WAS JUST GONNA SAY YOU LISTENED TO MADONNA OR SOMETHING! AHH! STOP HITTING ME!”

It took about twenty minutes to get the kids to stop teasing Bill and then another twenty to convince Billy not to actually murder Max. He was really in a rage about it and Steve felt bad for thinking it was kind of funny. By then it was almost midnight and the remaining members of the Monster Squad were getting ready to go home. Bev said that she had her mom's car and she'd take the rest of the kids home; Steve had kind of forgotten that she was a year older than them all.

Steve sent the kids off with Bev (Mike looked massively guilty and El was glaring at him) while Max cowered in the kitchen. “Are you *really* still mad at me?” she asked Bill.

“Fuck you,” Bill said dismissively. “You are on seriously *thin fucking ice* with me right now, you understand me?”

“Oh my god! I said I was sorry!”

“I shouldn't even fucking let you stay here, only reason is 'cause my fucking dad's back home.”

Max looked really aggrieved. “Come on, man, it's not even a big deal,” Steve told him.

“Whatever.” Bill sat on the couch all moody with his beer.

Steve sat down beside him. He felt really curious. “So ... do you still pluck them?”

“Fuck you!” Billy said right away. He got up and stalked away even though he'd just opened the beer. “I'm taking a fuckin' shower.”

“Hey, make sure you get yourself real pretty for me,” Steve said; he couldn't help it. Billy flipped him off and slammed the door.

“Steve, you're going to make him mad again!” Max yelled.

“I can handle him.”

“I don't know.” She had such little faith in him. “Well, I guess I'm going to bed.” She slanted her gaze over towards the hallway. “Good ... luck with him.”

Billy was in the shower for a real long time; Steve almost fell asleep on the couch. He wondered if Bill was practicing his good grooming habits. He was so weird. If Steve was Billy he might pluck his eyebrows too. They were a good feature on him.

Bill finally left the bathroom and went straight into his room; Steve stared after him and then followed. Billy was crashed out on his bed and still scowling up a storm. He had one of his weirdo band t-shirts on and a pair of grey sweatpants. “Hey, are you still pissed off?”

“No I'm not pissed off,” Bill said, obviously pissed off. Steve sat down on the bed next to him.

“It's not a big deal.”

"That shit was private," Bill told him. "I don't even fuckin' do it anymore."

"Wait, so did you really do it?" Steve asked him; Billy glared dangerously. "What, they look nice!"

"Fuck you, I'm sleeping." Bill rolled over onto his side like a dramatic baby.

"Oh, my god, Bill, come on." Steve grabbed his shoulder. "Are you seriously pissed at me?"

"I'm not pissed at you."

"If you show me how to do it I'll pluck them for you," Steve said sweetly; Billy rolled over and slugged him hard. "Ow!"

"Fuck you, now I gotta deal with you teasin' me about this shit?"

"Come on, you make fun of me all the time."

"No I don't," Bill said like a sulky baby.

"Uh, yeah, you do." Steve tried to touch his shoulder again and Billy shrugged him off.

"It's fucking embarrassing, I just let her do it a couple times 'cause she wanted to."

"It's really not a big deal. Those kids do so much embarrassing shit, no one's going to remember it tomorrow."

"Yeah, all the little shitheads already knows I'm a fuckin' faggot, now they know I used to let my girl do some dumb shit to me too."

Steve really wished he wouldn't say that word all the time. If Billy really thought that he was a fucking faggot then he probably thought that about Steve, too. Bill had called him that, before. "Man, it's not a big deal," he said again.

"Whatever. I'm tired."

Okay the sex plans were definitely going awry; this was totally stupid. "What, really?" Bill didn't answer him. "Bill, are you serious?" No answer, again. "Okay, what, do you want me to go home?"

"I don't care what you do," Bill told him deliberately.

That was so great. "Okay, whatever," Steve said. He laid on the bed for a long time, staring up at the ceiling. Bill flopped over and pulled the blanket over his head. Jesus he was so dramatic. Steve fell asleep to the sound of the ceiling fan clicking.

He woke up and felt like he was falling; that happened sometimes when he woke up suddenly.

His heart was pounding really hard. It felt like the whole bed was shaking and then after a couple seconds Steve realized that it actually was. Bill's lava lamp quivered and fell off of the nightstand, then the alarm clock did too.

Steve sat up in the bed and listened to the windowpane rattling; the ceiling fan swung dangerously. He realized that it was another earthquake and he felt totally fucking freaked out – he'd never been in town when one of them had happened.

The room stopped shaking but Steve's heart didn't stop pounding. He wondered if you could really have a heart attack from stress or something. It was almost hard to breathe for a moment, and he felt too hot.

Bill was an unmoving lump next to him covered up in two blankets; Steve reached out and touched what he hoped was Bill's shoulder. "Hey, are you awake?" The lump shifted slightly but otherwise didn't respond. Billy really did sleep like a corpse, or maybe he was still pissed.

Okay, that was okay. Steve swallowed hard. He could just be a normal person and go back to sleep. How was he supposed to sleep when what had just happened was definitely the opposite of normal?

He laid back down and tried to close his eyes; they kept popping

open in the dark. He felt too crazy again and it was almost as bad as being by himself in his room, or back down in the dark with all the kids screaming. Jesus he was being too stupid. He kind of felt like he was choking or drowning or something.

After a couple moments he sat up again and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Bill was still dead to the world so Steve got up and meandered into the bathroom; the bright lights above the mirror hurt his eyes. Some stuff had spilled out of the medicine cabinet and two of Max's potted plants were on the floor now. Steve picked everything up and stood looking in the mirror for a while. He still felt totally freaked out and seeing his big dumb face staring back at him didn't really help.

His head hurt and his eyes hurt. Steve pulled his contacts out. He'd left his old glasses here a couple days ago; they were in the medicine cabinet so he put them on. He didn't know why he couldn't calm down. It was too fucked up. He wondered if maybe Max was awake or something.

Well he definitely wasn't going to go sneaking into her room like a baby or a creep to check up on her. Steve went down the little hallway and tried to think of what he wanted to do. He ended up sitting in front of the TV – he'd forgotten to turn it off earlier and some infomercials were playing with the volume on low.

He sat down on the little couch and stared at the TV until his heart-rate felt normal. Sometimes when this happened at home he'd end up sitting downstairs all night; it hadn't happened in a while though. Well, not the earthquake thing, but the waking-up-and-having-a-panic attack thing. He guessed maybe that was what it was or something, a panic attack. Or maybe it was an anxiety attack, they were like the same thing he thought. Sometimes he felt like he'd never feel normal again. Last year when this stuff would happen he'd just drive around until he felt okay, or he'd go to Billy's house, but now he was already *at* Billy's house.

He just felt totally nuts and he didn't know what to do about it. He sat there for a long time; the infomercial ended and some old black-and-white movie came on. Steve felt like a total nerd or like Dustin or something (same difference) thinking it was *The Gate* or something.

Of course it was The Gate, it had to be, right? It wasn't like they were on a, a fault-line or something. At least he didn't think so. Maybe he should go to the library and look it up. He should –

“Hey, you alright?”

Steve looked up sharply, startled. “Jesus. Have you been there long?”

Billy was standing leaned up against the corner of the hallway with his arms folded loosely across his chest, watching Steve watch the TV. He didn't look pissed off anymore; he raised his eyebrows. “Long enough,” he said, as if Steve had said something funny.

Steve looked back at him and tried not to feel annoyed. There wasn't really anything funny. The room was so dim and quiet and Billy's skin and eyes seemed so bright, almost like he didn't belong there or something. It was too weird – it made Steve feel even crazier. He probably *looked* crazy too, like a crazy muppet or something. He was pretty sure his hair was sticking up, and he had his dumb glasses on.

Bill looked back at him too. He was shirtless now and still wearing his baggy sweatpants. The big cut he'd got from his car wreck started just above his armpit and wound up over his left collarbone. It'd scabbed over already from the stitches and it usually didn't look that bad. In the light from the TV now it looked pink and ugly.

Steve stared at it, then looked back at Bill's face. “What, did you take your shirt off and decide to come out here and bother me?”

Billy's eyebrows raised up even more and he got his nice smile on his face, like Steve was being silly instead of an asshole. It was nice to know he was so amusing. “Looks that way. You all right?” he said again when Steve didn't answer. With his good shoulder he pushed himself up off the wall and stepped further into the living room to stand next to the TV.

“Yeah. Sorry.” Steve's voice sounded loud in the muted dark of the room. He sat there and stared at Billy staring back at him. He felt totally weird – for a couple seconds he almost wanted Bill to go away.

Billy did not go away; he just kept looking at him. He unfolded his arms and dropped them to his sides, then he reached out and put a hand on top of the TV. "Don't want the remote?"

He still sounded like Steve was being funny. It was annoying. Steve looked at the sharp V of Bill's hip-bones going down into his sweatpants. Well, that looked nice. Jesus. Even during an anxiety attack and Bill being annoying, Steve couldn't stop being a little horndog it seemed. "Uh. No."

Bill took in Steve eyeing him up; he still had the faint smile on his face. Steve wondered if he was showing off or something. "You okay?"

"I think so, stop asking me," Steve said. "So what, are you still pissed off at me?"

"I wasn't pissed at you."

"Yeah, okay." Steve rubbed his face. "Did you – feel the earthquake?"

"No." Billy's expression turned blank. "What, there was another one?"

"Yeah, there was – it –" it felt like too many words and he felt stupid. *It woke me up and I got scared.*

"What, just now?"

"Like – " Steve rubbed his face again – "a half hour ago I guess."

"I didn't feel it."

"Well, it woke me up." Bill stared at him again and Steve wondered if he was actually going nuts. He *hadn't* imagined it. "Doesn't that freak you out?"

"I guess."

Okay. "Did I wake you up?"

Billy shrugged. He sat down on the red couch across from Steve and kept looking at him. "Guess I don't sleep too good either."

“What's that mean?”

“Nothing,” Bill said easily. “Just an observation.” Steve stared at him; Bill shifted on the couch and splayed his legs.

Jesus he was annoying. He couldn't even sit on the couch like a normal human. He was still staring, too.

“What?” Steve snapped again.

Another shrug. “Nothin'. You toss and turn and kick the shit out of me 'bout every night you've been here.”

“Oh.” He felt really dumb. “I thought I just did that at home.” Then he felt even dumber for saying that out loud. “Sorry. I don't mean to wake you up.”

“If it bothered me I woulda said.”

“Okay.”

Billy was *still* staring at him. He stared at Steve and so Steve stared at the TV. It went on for a while until it felt weird.

It felt *weird* and bad and Steve felt annoyed again. He shouldn't be annoyed at Bill's place; he was glad to be here and not alone in his house. He always wanted to be around Billy. Aside from at two AM, apparently, when he was having a freak-out over an earthquake that nobody else really cared about. It was too stupid.

He wished he *had* asked for the remote or something. If the volume was on maybe he wouldn't feel so weird about everything. His head hurt and his throat felt tight. He wished he was asleep; maybe he should have tried to stay in the bed. “You don't have to stay out here with me or whatever.”

Billy looked at Steve as though he was a real interesting program on the TV. He stretched back on the couch and put his hands behind his head. “What, you don't want me out here?”

“Uh, no, I just – “

“S'my place, I can do what I want.”

God he was really irritating at two in the morning; Steve would have to remember. “I just need like five minutes, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Stop staring at me.”

“I'm not,” Billy said, very obviously staring at him.

“Yeah, well, you're not, like – “ Steve cut himself off; he totally sounded like an asshole. “Sorry. You – uh, you got class in like six hours, you should go back to sleep.”

“Yeah, what about you?”

“What, I'm fine.” He forced a laugh out. “I'm good, I got like forty-five minutes.”

“Okay,” Billy said again. He was still staring at Steve like he was watching *Knight Rider*. “So you have a nightmare or something?”

“No, I didn't have a *nightmare*,” Steve snapped, probably too harshly. Maybe he had. He felt stupid; Bill didn't need to know about it. “The fuckin' earthquake woke me up.”

“Okay.”

“I guess you don't think it's a big deal. You know we don't really have those around here.”

“Yeah, I know that.” Bill was still watching him. “Not like we can do anything about it.”

“I guess.”

“Hopper said he checked out the lab again, nothin's happening.”

Steve stared blankly at him. “When did you talk to Hopper?”

“I dunno, the other day.” Billy shrugged; it made his stupid muscles ripple. Stupid.

“At your graduation party?”

“I guess.”

“What were those papers he gave you?”

Bill's eyes shifted to the side. “Hospital stuff,” he said. “Look, you okay now?”

“Yeah. I guess,” Steve said. It was weird that Bill was asking after him so much. Maybe it shouldn't be weird and Steve was being a jerk. They were supposed to be together or whatever. “I just – look, I – I never go back to sleep when I wake up like this, you don't need to sit up with me. I'm not a baby.”

“I know that. Babies sleep for like twelve hours.” They stared at each other some more. “Okay, come over here.”

Steve felt weird again in two seconds. “What, why?”

“Come over here.”

“Uh, thanks, I'm good.”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Just come over here.”

Jesus. Steve got up and crossed the room. It had been damp and humid outside all night – the dark sky beyond the little window was almost purple, but the apartment was cold; Steve felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He stood looking down at Billy. Who still had his hands behind his head like a little jerk. “What, what do you want?”

“Come sit down with me.”

“Uh, why?”

“Because I want you to sit with me,” Bill said like Steve was slow.

It was too annoying and he felt sick. “Okay.” Steve sat down.

Bill turned his head and looked at him. “Good job,” he said. He

patted Steve's leg like Steve was a dog or a grandpa. "Now put your head in my lap."

What? "Uh, yeah, no."

"Come on, just do it."

"Thanks, I'm good," Steve said again.

Billy rolled his eyes. "Oh my god, man, just fucking lay down and put your head in my lap."

"I don't really feel like – "

"Why are you makin' a big thing out of it? I thought you liked this shit."

"Yeah, but you're not – " He wasn't making a big thing out of it. Well, he didn't think he was; it was two AM and he felt weird. Steve was all for cuddling and shit but Billy had teased him about it before. He was pretty sure that Bill just tolerated stuff like that. "I can just go back to bed."

Billy rolled his eyes again. He patted his lap in an exaggerated way. "I'm real comfy, I got creds."

"I bet you do." Steve felt suspicious. "What are you trying to do here?"

"Jesus Christ, I don't mean it like a sex thing, just fucking lay down."

Well. It would be okay if it was a sex thing but a little warning would be nice. "Why?"

"Because I fuckin' said." They glared at each other for a moment.

"Fine, whatever." Steve huffed around on the couch and laid down. Billy had really strong thighs; Steve felt them through the sweatpants. He smelled like Ivory soap which was nice but weird.

Steve stretched out and dug his toes down in the crevice between the cushion and the arm of the couch. He wiggled around a little. He

guessed Bill was pretty comfortable even though it still felt like a trick or something — Billy had been so pissed at him earlier. He looked up mistrustful. “Happy?”

“Thrilled,” Billy drawled. “You're a fuckin' piece of work, man.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Do you know?” Bill asked him. There was a weird pause. “Okay, now close your eyes.”

Steve immediately felt more suspicious. It was definitely a trick. “Uh, no.”

“Oh, my god, man, can you just fucking – “

“Why?” Steve looked up at him; Billy made a face. He pulled Steve's glasses off his face which was annoying.

“Just close your eyes, okay?”

“No. This is stupid.”

“What, don't trust me?”

That wasn't fair. “Uh, I – “

“Steve,” Bill interrupted him. He sounded really annoyed so Steve shut up. “You said you can't sleep. Just do it.”

“Jesus.” Steve closed his eyes. “I swear to god, if you pull your dick out right now – “

Billy laughed. “You piece of shit, calm down,” he said. He put a hand in Steve's hair which was nice, but still maybe a trick. “Okay,” he said in a weird voice. He shifted around and cleared his throat. “Uh. Hope this's okay.” He patted Steve's hair twice, smoothing it down. With his other hand he reached out and kind of cupped Steve's jaw for a second. He swept his fingers across Steve's forehead, then down his cheek. He traced Steve's chin with two fingers, really light.

Steve's eyes popped open again. “What are you doing?”

Billy looked really pissed off in two seconds. His nostrils even flared and everything; it was really attractive. “Close your *fucking* eyes,” he said. The promise of a threat rumbled deep down in his throat.

“Okay, okay, okay.” Steve forced them shut. Bill kept on moving his hand down and across Steve's face with two fingers. He put his left hand back in Steve's hair.

It was like Bill was – petting him or something. He was actually being kind of gentle. It was totally weird.

“What, uh, what are you doing to me?”

“It's a sleep technique.” Billy kept on petting him. He drew his fingers across Steve's forehead again, sweeping down against his cheek.

“What technique?”

“What, this?” Bill kind of laughed; Steve felt the vibration move down his body. “This is called the, ah, the Face Trace.”

“The *what?*” Steve was pretty sure he had a huge dumbo smile on his face. He opened his eyes again.

Bill pulled his hair. “Ain't gonna work if you don't keep your fucking eyes closed.”

“Ow, Jesus. Sorry.” It didn't really hurt. The other hand had reached his forehead again; Billy ran a finger over Steve's right eyebrow, then his left. Steve watched the light from the TV change colors on his face.

“Man. Close your eyes.”

“Okay, sorry.” Steve closed his eyes. He probably looked like a huge dork. “What are you doing?” he asked again.

“My mom used to do this with me if I couldn't sleep,” Bill told him. “Like if I had a nightmare or something. It's the Face Trace,” he explained like Steve was dumb. He ran a hand over Steve's brow. “She'd just sit up with me until I felt okay.”

Billy never talked about his mom. He just never did, barely ever. It'd been almost a year that he and Steve had been hanging out and he'd mentioned his mom maybe four or five times; twice he'd been stoned.

"When you were a kid?"

"Yeah, like five or six." He didn't say anything else for a couple seconds and Steve wished he could open his eyes. He wondered what Billy was thinking about.

"So how's it work?"

"I dunno." Bill's hand was still moving over Steve's face; two fingers trailed over his chin. He swiped his thumb against the underside of Steve's jaw. Bill's hands were always really rough, probably from working at the autobody shop. It felt nice. "You're supposed to be relaxed."

"I am relaxed," Steve told him. He thought he was.

"Okay," Bill said in the weird voice again. "Feels okay?"

"Yeah, it's good."

"Okay." Bill petted his hair some more, a little clumsy. It was kind of like – if a gorilla tried to hold a kitten or something. Steve smiled again. "You know, I, uh – we, we lived at this shitty apartment til I was like four, then she got her parents' house. I was real scared of all kindsa shit."

"What, you?"

"Yeah, me." He sounded a little rueful (SAT word), or like Steve was being funny again. "I was a real pain in the ass, my mom used to sit up with me a lot."

"What were you scared of?"

"That's classified," Bill said as if he was Dustin or something; he made Steve laugh.

"Oh, come on."

"I don't know. Kid stuff. Ghosts and shit. My dad, the dark. Uh. Spiders. You ever seen a Trapdoor Spider?"

"We don't have those here. Just Black Widows."

Billy snorted, this little exhale. "Even better," he said. Steve smiled again. "I don't care 'bout 'em now."

"What else were you scared of?"

"Mm, I dunno." He sounded thoughtful. "Did I say my dad?"

"I think so."

"Uh, you know. That zombie on the TV, like in that silent film. Nosfer-a-tu. And – "

"Nice try, that's a vampire," Steve told him.

"Same difference."

"Not really, I thought you of all people would know that." Bill pinched him which wasn't nice or relaxing. "Ow!"

"Okay, Mr. Smart Guy, the *vampire* from that old movie. Charles Manson breakin' in. Oh and the dead dude in that comic, *Tales from the Crypt*." There was the briefest pause. "And the Gerber Baby."

"WHAT?" Steve opened his eyes again.

Billy laughed his hyena laugh, looking at Steve's face. "You know, on the jars and the baby oatmeal."

"Thanks, I know who the Gerber Baby is," Steve told him patiently. "How the hell were you scared of that?"

"I was fuckin' six."

"Yeah, but how – "

"Eyes," Bill reminded him.

Steve closed his eyes. Bill was nuts. "That doesn't make any sense,

he's a baby.”

“So what?”

“He can't do anything.”

“Okay, why's he fuckin' grey?” Billy demanded.

Steve started laughing. “I don't – okay, I don't know.”

“Yeah, nobody does,” Bill said with conviction. “My dad used to tell me he was gonna move next door and eat me if I didn't clean up my toys.”

“That's totally fucked up.”

“I know.” All the while Bill's hand moved across his face in this weird gentle way; it really did feel nice. “Look, this don't work if you talk about bad shit.”

Apparently the Gerber Baby was very bad shit. Steve was pretty sure he had another dopey smile on his face. He felt all stupid with Billy's hand in his hair and his hand on his face.

He hummed a little. “Okay, I'll stop askin' you about the Gerber Baby.”

Bill pulled his hair a little again, not that hard. That still felt kind of nice too. Interesting. “If you fucking tell anybody about what I – “

“Who would I tell?”

“Well, your boy Henderson's already got a lot of material on me,” Billy reminded him. “I'm really trusting you, man.”

“I appreciate it.” Steve looked up at him. “Hey, I'm sorry for teasing you earlier or whatever. I didn't mean anything by it.”

Bill shifted over a little bit and leaned back on the couch. His hand moved in Steve's hair. “Yeah, that's okay. Sorry I got all stupid about it. It's embarrassing.”

"It's really not that bad."

"Okay, whatever. So what about you?"

Steve opened one eye and squinted. "What, me?"

"Yeah, what are you scared of?"

"I thought you said it didn't work if we talked about bad shit."

"Yeah, but I wanna know."

He thought about it. "What, now, or as a kid?"

"I dunno. Both. Now."

Steve realized he'd trapped himself. He felt stupid again. "You know that stuff already."

Billy had to remember that night back in February when he'd stayed over at Steve's place for the weekend. Steve had had that big nightmare and they'd sat out by the pool, then ended up in the pool. They'd almost kissed that night. Maybe. Well, Steve thought so. *Monsters. Losing people.* It was as dumb as the Gerber Baby, and he wasn't six.

If Bill remembered he wasn't saying anything. "What, you want me to talk about it again?"

"Not if you don't wanna." Bill moved his hands away for a second to shift around on the couch. Steve realized he could feel Lots of Stuff from where he was laying – Billy didn't seem to like underwear too much. It was so interesting.

He continued running his finger-tips down Steve's face, like he was memorizing a map or something. "I meant like normal, day-to-day shit."

"Not monsters?"

"Just the ones on the TV," Bill reassured him.

Steve guessed that was okay. "Okay."

"So what you scared of?"

"Oh, so much," Steve told him. Billy traced a finger over his huge Big Bird nose; Steve was going to get turned on at this rate. He tried to think of less sexy things. "Okay. The attic at my grandma's in Philly. Exposed drains, asbestos. Th –"

Billy laughed his nice laugh that said Steve was being funny. "Shut up."

"What? I'm serious. Okay, rats and mice, like not because they're scary but what if they poop on your food during the night, I think about that all the time when we're at restaurants together."

"They got regulations."

"No, they don't, that's all for show. My mom made me watch a documentary," Steve said; Billy laughed once more.

"How much rat shit you think we ate at Hathaway's?"

"In 1987? Probably like a pound already."

"That's disgusting, shut up," Bill told him again. "What else?"

Steve didn't say anything so Billy shoved his shoulder. "What? You just told me to shut up."

"Shut up about rat shit, keep tellin' me stuff." He combed his hand through Steve's hair again.

"Okay, uh. Getting electrocuted, I guess, I mean everyone's scared of that, right?"

"Sure."

"I guess ... well, somethin' happening to the dogs, or my mom. Falling down in the shower and breaking my leg or something, you know 'cause I'd be naked."

“Yep.” Billy sounded really amused.

“Uh, choking to death in a restaurant. I – “

“Hathaway's?”

“No. Maybe. Do you know that you pee when you die?”

“Can shit yourself too.”

“That's, that's great,” Steve said; Billy laughed. “I'm not the biggest fan of heights, uh. Hopper's pretty scary too. Michael Myers since you made me watch *Halloween* twice.”

“Wow, all right. Like, serial killers in general or specifically Michael Myers?”

Steve thought about it. “I think just Michael Myers.”

“Cause of the mask?”

“Yeah, and if you do something as a joke now we're not talkin' anymore, I mean it.”

“Hey, man, I'm not.” He was laughing again. “What else?”

“Mm. Teeth falling out, I mean my teeth but also other people's teeth, my car breaking down again, hairless cats.”

“What?”

“What? They look weird.” Okay, Steve felt way less turned on now, what with the teeth and the cats and the asbestos. “I thought you weren't supposed to talk about bad stuff, do we just sit in silence now?”

“That'd be ideal,” Bill said all dry like he hadn't asked Steve to tell him a bunch of shit. “You got a lot of stuff, man.”

“I know, you made me feel so much better.”

Billy laughed. “Uh, okay, well, my moms would ask me to tell her somethin' good about my day and we'd talk about it, we can do that

if you want.”

Jeez. That was really cute and all. It was so weird to think about Billy as a little kid; that was probably shitty. He just seemed so tough all the time, like he'd been born as a scowling teenager. “Oh, okay. Go ahead.”

Billy snorted. “What, me?”

“Yeah.”

“Today?”

“Yeah, today.”

“I don't know.” He sounded surprised. “Uh, my fireworks and shit. Seein' you.” He was so corny. “And I got to switch out a carburetor in an old car today, s'like the first thing Hank's let me do since I came back.”

“Really? I didn't know that, that's great.”

“Yeah, they got rid of 'em in a lotta the new cars.”

Steve didn't really know what a carburetor was. Maybe something in the engine. “Is it hard to change them?”

“Not really, takes a couple minutes. It's easy, he was humorin' me.” For some reason that made Steve smile. “Okay, what about you?”

“Oh, I don't know,” Steve said too. “Uh, I guess your fireworks and shit too.”

“I know, was good, right?” Billy combed his hands through Steve's hair again which felt really nice. His head hurt less now too. “What else?”

“Mm. I don't know. Does it being Friday count?”

“I guess.”

“Oh, uh, okay – well, I got to call customers for like two hours at

work, I'm good at that.”

“Oh yeah? How come you don't do that all the time?”

“My dad says it's not for me. I got stuck filing orders.”

“Oh. Right. Okay.” Bill didn't say anything else for a couple moments. He kept combing his hands through Steve's hair. It probably either looked really good or really messed up.

Bill asked about Steve's mom sometimes but he never really talked about Steve's dad. Well, *Steve* didn't talk about his dad but Bill never said anything about him or asked about him. Steve guessed that Billy had enough problems with his own old man – actually he probably thought Steve was a huge whiny baby. Then Bill said, “So when do I get to meet this prick again?”

Oh. “He'll be at my mom's big party in a couple weeks, you'll see him schmoozin' around and picking on me.”

“Great, can't wait.”

“Do you still want to go?”

“Yep,” Bill said shortly; Steve guessed that was that.

They sat in silence for a couple minutes with Bill petting his hair. Steve closed his eyes again. It just felt really nice or whatever. Nobody had really done this with him in a long time, and not like this. He guessed he *did* feel kind of relaxed. In an hour he might even feel sleepy. “Hey, tell me more stuff about you.”

“Why? What you wanna know?”

“I don't know, you never tell me stuff.”

“Sure I do.”

“Mm. Mm-mm.” Steve shook his head. “Not like this.”

“Oh, what, not at two in the mornin'?”

Billy almost sounded amused again; Steve dared to pry an eye open. "I guess."

The room seemed a little brighter now that he'd been laying out here for a while. Bill was looking straight ahead at the TV and he didn't look pissed off for once, like how he usually looked when Steve started asking him a bunch of questions. He wasn't smiling but he wasn't scowling or glaring either.

One (apparently well-groomed) eyebrow went up. "I can see you, ya look stupid."

Steve opened both eyes. "I can see up your nose," he informed Bill.

"Yeah, that's great. 'M I all blurry without your glasses?"

"No." Steve closed and opened one eye, then the other. "Mm, kind of. I only can't see up close in one eye. I'm far-sighted in my left."

"That really a thing?"

"Yeah, anything's a thing. Did you ever go to the eye doctor in your life?"

"Course I did, when I was like ten."

Jesus. "So you might need glasses?"

Billy made a face which was really attractive from the angle Steve was laying at. "I don't need glasses."

"If I don't wear my glasses or my contacts for like a day, I get like a, a lazy eye. I'd go cross-eyed lookin' at you." He had no clue why he was volunteering this sensitive information about himself. Maybe Bill would forgive him for teasing him about his eyebrows earlier.

"Man, shut up," Billy said in delight. He really was smiling now. He almost looked, like – fond or something. Steve liked him looking like that.

"Okay, I thought you were gonna tell me something."

“Like what?”

“I don't know. Okay, what's, uh, what's, like, the best day you ever had?”

Billy laughed. “I don't know,” he said.

“Come on, think about it. And no bullshit. Do you have something?”

“No. What about you?”

“Uhh. Well.” Steve guessed he didn't really know either. A year or two ago he would have said some stupid shit with Nancy, probably. Obviously that didn't count anymore, and Billy really wouldn't want to hear about that anyway. “Does that time when we beat up Tommy count?”

“Yeah, but tell me somethin' else.”

“Um, okay.” He tried to think. “All right, don't make fun of me.”

“Me? Make fun of you?” Bill was teasing him.

“Yeah, asshole,” Steve said. “Um, okay, I guess when I was like fourteen and I got this home run at softball. It was our big game.”

“Oh yeah? Did you do that?”

“Yep. Bases loaded, pouring rain.”

“That's awesome. I ain't know you played that.”

“Just, ah, in middle school. Uh, so my parents were there, my dad was like actually proud of me for once. We went out to the city with Tommy and Carol for dinner.”

“That's nice, man,” Billy told him. “Did you go all out?”

“Yeah, I got two desserts.”

Bill laughed. “I bet ya did.”

“My mom and my dad actually got along for like five hours, it was

probably the last time they did that. It was – I mean, it's not really exciting or anything. What about you?"

Billy was quiet for a couple seconds. "Guess I don't really know," he said finally.

"You have to say something."

"I was listenin' to you." He shifted again. "Okay, you remember back in May when I stayed over at your place and you wore those red shorts – "

"Come on, shut up," Steve said right away. His face felt hot; he was going to get a boner or something. He did remember. Bill had sat him down in a kitchen chair and blown him at like four PM on a Friday. They'd spent all weekend making out and hooking up. "I'm serious."

"What?" Bill ran his hand down Steve's neck and smoothed a palm over the front of his t-shirt. Okay the boner was happening. At least it was dark still, pretty dark, and he had his jeans on. "Was a good weekend."

"Sure, I agree."

"Had a lot of those with you."

"Yeah, totally," Steve said. He didn't want Bill to think that he didn't – well, he loved being with Billy and everything. Every time they hung out was like the best time. But he guessed everything else lately hadn't been so great. "No, but – you know, not just some dumb shit with me."

"It's not dumb."

"I know that, I just mean – what about, uh, some stuff with your mom or something?"

Billy didn't answer him; that was definitely the wrong thing to say. His hand stopped moving in Steve's hair. "I dunno."

"Sorry, I didn't mean – "

“No, I just uh, I don't really remem – I mean, that was a long time ago with her,” Billy said in his weird voice again; it almost wobbled.

Hope this is okay. Steve felt like shit in two seconds. Bill had already told him so much tonight. “Sorry, forget it.”

“No, I'll tell ya,” Billy said, and then didn't say anything again. “It ain't – with my mom or anything. You still wanna know about it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.” He hoped he sounded encouraging.

Bill still sounded stilted. “I guess, uh – okay, was the summer right before we moved here.” He licked his lips. “Guess it was when – took Max and my girl out to Disneyland for a day, maybe like two Augusts ago.”

“Really? You guys went there?”

“It ain't like the big park out in Florida,” Billy told him. He started petting Steve's hair again, a little rough. “I mean it's nice. Was like this – me and Trace didn't have work, think it was a Wednesday or somethin'. It was kinda raining out, was real cold for where we lived. We didn't have shit else to do, Max said she wanted to go so we just went. It was just, uh ... “ He trailed off; he was still petting Steve's hair. “It was a good time.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was before I – “ He licked his lips again. “Look, I don't wanna talk about my girl if you don't wanna hear it.”

“I don't m – “

“Wasn't like with me and you,” Bill said.

Steve didn't really know what that meant. “Okay, what was it like?”

Billy didn't answer him for a couple seconds. When Steve opened his eyes again, Bill was just looking at the TV. “I never really ... I just known her for a real long time, you know?”

“Sure,” Steve said even though he didn't know.

“She was like my best friend, I always wanted to be nice to her. Known her since she was a kid, we was always together. She wanted to go around with me. You know, like we was supposed to. That was my girl.”

That was my girl. He'd said that twice in thirty seconds; he'd said it before, too. Steve didn't really understand what all that meant. Everything Billy'd just said hadn't really cleared it up either.

He wasn't jealous or whatever – he never had been, not about Tracey. That was way before he and Billy had started hooking up so it didn't matter; it was like with him and Nancy. It wasn't like you were only supposed to be with one person ever.

But he guessed he'd never really understood about Billy and his girlfriend. Bill had said that he'd treated her like shit but he always had these nice stories about her. He was supposed to be gay or whatever and he'd been making all these jokes about being – queer lately and all. But then he'd talk about Tracey like a longing boyfriend or like he missed her. That was okay; Steve'd just always thought Bill had felt bad about what had happened between them or something.

“I know that,” was all he could say.

“Used to patch me up after my old man'd be beating on me.”

Well, I could do that too, Steve managed not to say. Okay maybe he was the teeniest bit jealous and that was stupid. He *definitely* didn't want to see Bill get beat up again. It wasn't like – well, he'd only really known Billy for less than a year. It made him wonder how many times Bill had sat around with his girlfriend like this, her head in his lap. She probably wouldn't have thought it was a trick like Steve had. He thought he knew Billy but sometimes he felt like maybe he didn't. He felt shitty for feeling annoyed earlier.

“You're not going to get beat on anymore.”

“Yeah, I know that,” Bill said and didn't say anything else.

“Tell me more about Disneyland,” Steve instructed him.

"Oh, right." Bill twisted his fingers around Steve's hair. "Yeah, so it was just like – I mean, she – well Tracey hadn't been out there since her old man died. And Max ain't been out there since her dad left. And *I* ain't been to Disneyland with my old man, if you can believe it," Billy told him. "So we were just like, fuck it, let's go. Got my beer and got in the car."

"Sounds like a Billy Hargrove plan," Steve said; Bill grinned.

"Yeah, it was like kinda stormin' out so there wasn't any lines or any bullshit," he said. "I felt – you know. The girls had a good time. Max got those stupid mouse ears, ate a buncha popcorn. Was probably the like last time that she ever got to see Tr – " he stopped for a long time.

Steve waited and got nothing. He waited some more. "Okay, but did you guys go on the Submarine Voyage?"

Billy made a face. "Je-sus, you fuckin' nerd, that ain't even like a good ride."

Steve laughed. "I don't know, I've never been there." He'd seen a flyer before. When he was a kid his mom had always talked about Disney World, but something had always come up, and then she'd started working again.

"They got roller coasters and shit too, you ever been on a roller coaster in your life?"

"Yeah, at the carnival," Steve told him; Billy laughed too. "Uh, it's not funny. Actually I get motion sickness, so."

"Doesn't surprise me," Billy said flatly. He was such a prick.

"Hey, have you ever been to the Charles Street Carnival? No, right? I know you didn't go last year, you were stomping around everywhere with your ugly cast on your arm."

"Yeah, look at me now, I got fuckin' nerve damage."

Steve was quiet for a moment. "What, are you serious?"

“That was a joke.”

He couldn't really tell if Billy was lying or not; it was two in the morning and he felt a little dizzy. “I'll take you to the carnival.”

“Okay, I'll take ya to Disneyland.”

“Really?”

“Thought we was supposed to go out there anyway.”

“Yeah, but you didn't say Disney before.”

“Whatever, we can go. Max'll take you to all the dorky shit,” Bill said. He was totally getting Metallica tickets; Steve had just decided.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Billy said too. It felt weird again, like they should say more stuff. “Well, that was my good day. Maybe we could – ” he stopped again. The TV flashed on his face and his eyes looked violet for a second.

“What?”

“I dunno. We could – do stuff like that too.”

“Uh, yeah, that's what we're talking about.”

Billy rolled his amazing eyes. “I meant like – we can go on ... vacation or whatever. I don't – like, maybe next summer when your school gets out,” he said quickly. His voice sounded so weird and it made Steve feel weird too. *Hope this s'okay*. He realized Billy must be nervous.

“Sure, we can do that,” he said right away. “You really think I'm gonna get into Indiana State?” He didn't even know where the application was anymore.

“Yeah, you're gonna get in,” Bill said shortly. “Celebrate your first semester, I'll take ya out to California. You can see the ocean, meet Mickey Mouse.” He looked down at Steve with the amazing eyes.

“Pluto's there too,” he said in a stupid voice.

He made Steve laugh. “Yeah, no, that's great. Uh, we should probably go camping first, make sure we don't kill each other.”

“Okay. In three weeks, right?”

“Yep.”

“Cool. I'll tell my boss.” Bill was staring at the TV again. “You tired yet or what?”

Steve thought about it; he actually was. “Yeah, can we go back to your room?”

“Sure, get offa me.”

“What time is it?”

Billy reached over and lifted Steve's wrist to look at his watch. “Three-thirty.”

“Oh.” Shit. It was really late. They'd been out here for a long time; Steve hadn't realized. He climbed off of Bill and then gave him a hand up.

Billy let Steve pull him to his feet. “Thanks.”

They went down the little hallway – the light was still on in the bathroom but Bill didn't move to turn it off. Steve reached out and put a hand on Billy's shoulder before he turned into the doorway of his room. “Hey, thanks for sitting up with me.” He guessed he felt all stupid and emotional over it. Nobody had ever really done that for him before. Well, who would?

“Yeah, no problem.” Bill had his nice smile on his face again. “You wanna go to sleep?”

“Uh, no.”

Bill's face fell almost comically. “Man, I thought you s – “ he shut up when Steve leaned in and kissed him. He started grinning against

Steve's mouth right away. "Okay." He let Steve push him against the doorway.

It was so nice to kiss Billy. Steve hadn't got to do it all night. Bill had a really great mouth – it was soft and full like a girl's and Bill would murder him if he ever said that out loud. Steve bit at Billy's bottom lip and pulled it in between his teeth; Billy laughed and growled into the kiss. He was always making his crazy animal sounds. He wasn't really like a cat at all though. Maybe like a mountain lion or something.

Okay felines weren't sexy; Steve stopped thinking about them. He curled a hand around the back of Bill's neck and kissed him some more, not gently. He *wanted* to be gentle but the thing was that they weren't wearing a lot of clothes. The warmth of Bill's body was making Steve feel really hot. Like sexy-hot, not sweaty-hot. Okay maybe sweaty too. It didn't matter. He fumbled around and put his other hand down the waistband of Bill's dumb sweatpants.

"Mm," Billy said into his mouth. He was still grinning; he put his hand over Steve's wrist though. "Thought you wanted to wait."

Steve stared at him blankly. "That was like three weeks ago."

"Oh, thank fuck." Bill dropped his hand and kissed him again. He wrapped his arms around Steve and tugged him closer.

Steve got a hand down the stupid sweatpants. Bill was already hard – he always got so hard for Steve and it was amazing. He was already hard and Steve thanked fuck too because it felt like his own dick was about to rip through his jeans. It would be terrible; he really liked this pair. It'd been about a minute and he didn't think he'd ever been more turned on in his life. Billy moaned really loud when Steve wrapped his hand around him.

Steve covered Bill's mouth with his own to shut him up. "Jesus, you're going to kill me."

"Uhh." Bill's hips bucked helplessly against Steve's hand. It was so amazing. "Fuck. I'm not doing anything." He bit Steve's earlobe.

“Fuck,” Steve said too. Billy laughed; his breath was hot against Steve's ear. Steve started working him slowly with his hand and Billy moaned again. *This* was what they were good at. Not just this but definitely this. “Stop laughing at me.”

“Mm – I'm not – “

He kissed the side of Bill's jaw and then down his neck. He sucked on his pulse-point, just above his collarbone, tried to grip him at the angle he wanted. The tip of Billy's dick was wet; Steve swiped his thumb over the head of it.

Fuck. Steve's mouth actually watered – he was such a freak. He wanted Billy's dick. He wanted to suck it; he wanted it in his mouth; he wanted to feel it; he wanted to hear Billy moan. He wanted to – he wanted to do all kinds of stuff. He wanted to do way more than suck Billy's dick but he didn't know how to get that.

It was a start at least. He dropped down to his knees and pulled the stupid sweatpants down.

Bill's head thumped against the doorframe. “Shit.”

Billy had a great-looking dick; Steve had been thinking about sucking it for almost a whole month now. Bill always talked about how huge Steve's was but Steve thought his was pretty nice too. He should tell him. It was big but not too big and it was thick; the head of it was the same color as his lips. Steve had a lot of things he wanted to do to it; he could make it so good.

Right now he couldn't think of any of his cool moves though. He was too hard-up and he just wanted it. God he really wanted it; he was going totally nuts thinking about it. He kissed his way down one sharp hip-bone and drew the tip of Bill's cock into his mouth.

Billy moaned, really loud. His hand slid up the back of Steve's neck and tangled in his hair. “UHH FUCK,” he said like a crazy person, not a quiet one. “Hahahahahaha okay.”

“Ohmygodshutup,” Steve begged him desperately. In his crazy horndog state he'd forgotten that Bill's sister was sleeping about ten

feet away. "Max is gonna wake up and come out here!"

Bill's head thumped against the door again. "Her fault." He sounded like he was grinning so Steve bit his hip. "Shit. Keep doing that."

"*Jesus.*" He put his mouth back on Bill's cock. It actually pulsed in his mouth and it made him feel kind of crazy, crazier, because Billy wanted him. God Billy wanted him. He circled his tongue around the thick head of it and tried to take the length in his mouth. Bill thrust against him and Steve almost choked which probably wasn't very sexy.

"Fuck. Sorry." Bill's voice was really strained.

Steve didn't mind. He kept on sucking Billy's dick; he wrapped a hand around his hip and cupped his balls which was a thing that Bill liked. He drew back and licked the head of his cock, then kissed it twice, kind of sloppy. He pressed his tongue against the slit which Bill apparently liked too; Steve was pretty sure he'd just lost about a fistful of hair.

"Fuck."

Steve kissed his dick and then did it again; Billy actually shook. "Good?"

"Uhhhhhhh hahahahahaha," said Billy like a nutcase. "Shit."

Oh God Steve was totally nuts – he even liked Billy laughing like a crazy hyena. He was too fucking hard and it almost hurt. He was going to bust in his jeans like a kid. He got Bill's dick back in his mouth and this time he really did choke on it; he didn't mind. Everything was sloppy and blurry he was pretty sure there was drool everywhere.

Bill thrust against him again and choked him some more and Steve fucking loved it; there was something wrong with him. He didn't know if he should love it so much. He was going to fucking come in his pants with Billy choking him with his dick. He kept on bobbing back and forth on Bill's cock and letting him choke him.

Billy's hand tightened in Steve's hair again and he was trying to pull

him back. "Fuck, I, uh – " he said and Steve knew he was going to come soon; it had been a while.

He didn't let Billy pull him back. He gripped his hip harder and pushed him against the wall. "Fuck," Billy said again. His dick pulsed in Steve's mouth and Steve wanted it – he thought he actually moaned. Everything got really tense and tight and his eyes were kind of watering and everything was pulsing around him and then Billy came.

He came for a while; Steve fucking drooled and swallowed most of it. It was supposed to be gross to swallow it but it was easier to. Steve didn't really see the issue. Most girls he'd been with spit it out which had always made him feel kind of bad. It was easier to swallow it; it was kind of hot.

Bill took his hand out of Steve's hair and pulled him up by his shoulder. He kissed Steve before he could even wipe his mouth off. He kissed Steve and kissed him like he wanted to get inside him. He pulled him through the doorway of his room, then kicked the door closed and slammed Steve against it. He kissed Steve again and put his tongue in his mouth. Steve wondered if Bill could taste his come in his mouth; that was hot too.

Somehow they fell onto the bed together. Billy tripped on him and kicked his sweatpants off. He pulled Steve's t-shirt off and started kissing his neck right away. He bit his way down Steve's collarbone and sucked a nipple into his mouth which made Steve shake and give out a gasp; he hadn't really known he was into that. Billy laughed like an evil demon and bit his nipple twice, then the other one. He trailed a line with his tongue down Steve's stomach and started fumbling around with his jeans. "The fuck you wearing this shit for – "

"Uh – I thought – you were gonna kick me out – " he helped Bill get the button undone.

"Huh-uh." Bill yanked Steve's jeans and underwear down and they fussed around for a couple minutes getting them off. They were both totally naked; Billy flopped down on Steve's legs and Steve got a hand in Billy's pretty curly hair. Bill licked Steve's inner thigh, then sucked

one of his balls into his mouth.

“Uhhhmygod,” Steve said like a crazy person too, not a quiet one. At least they weren't in the hallway anyway.

Billy laughed and sucked some more, then moved to the other one; Steve could feel his stupid hand shaking in Bill's stupid hair. Jesus H he was *not* going to fucking come before Bill even got to his dick: he tried his hardest (ha) to think of the most unsexy things he could. Hairless cats, the asbestos, the Gerber Baby. Hopper at the roller rink.

Okay no that was too unsexy. Steve looked at the long line of Bill's body stretched out on the bed; he really did look like a statue or a painting or something.

Billy released him and started kissing his way over Steve's hip. He ran his hand over the grove of hair above Steve's cock. For some reason that was really hot. “Missed doing this with you.”

“Uhhhh, same,” Steve said. He needed to work on his bedroom talk. “Do you want me to shave like you do?” It would probably be nice for Billy to not have to pick pubic hair out of his teeth.

“Nah, I like you all fuzzy.”

“Ha, okay,” Steve babbled out because Bill had finally reached his cock. He mouthed the underside of it and then kissed all the way down to his balls, then licked a hot stripe back up to the tip. “God.”

“Good?”

“Mm,” Steve managed. His face felt flushed; he probably looked great.

“Hey. Look at me.” Steve looked at him. “You're so hot, baby,” Bill told him like he could hear his thoughts and Steve felt fucking nuts. He wanted to fucking come all over his face. He wanted to get it in his hair. Oh my god if Billy would let him come in his hair. He was gonna –

Billy sucked the tip of his dick into his mouth and Steve actually saw stars. He probably blacked out for a second. It was too good. Billy

was too good at this; Steve almost couldn't believe he'd never done this before with another guy. Bill shifted up and kissed his stomach some more; Steve had been fucking leaking all over himself the whole time Bill had been kissing him and he was a big mess. Billy licked it up and then went back on Steve's cock.

Jesus. He was so hot; he made Steve so hot. He also realized that Billy had just called him *baby* and he was probably going to go insane. Nobody ever called him stuff like that. He kept babbling out Bill's name like a little idiot.

“Oh, god, Billy – “

“Yeah, I'm right here,” Bill muttered around his dick. He grabbed one of Steve's hands and kept working on him; Steve gripped his wrist hard. He had no idea how he'd lasted this long – when Billy moved up again and took Steve's whole dick down his throat Steve came too suddenly in a hot rush. It was so good it almost hurt; his thighs shook and he couldn't breathe.

Billy kept on sucking him until it was too much and Steve had to grab him to pull him off. Bill flopped down next to him and wiped his mouth off, then kissed him. They were both totally naked and really sweaty; Billy's upper lip tasted salty.

Steve kissed him for a while and then Bill pulled away. “You're a fucking monster,” he told Steve.

Steve felt grumpy for a second. He wanted more kissing. “Sorry, I didn't warn you.”

Bill just looked at him and he had that same nice smile on his face that he'd had on the whole night; maybe that was – his, his smile for Steve or something. That'd be nice. It was dark in the room aside from the lava lamp and Bill's eyes were glittering. “Can you go again?” he asked real serious.

“Uh, I don't know.” He thought about Bill saying *You're so hot, baby* and felt all stupid. He ran his hand through Bill's hair and kissed him again. “Give me, like, four minutes.”

Billy was grinning against Steve's mouth; he made one of his weird animal growls and bit Steve's lip. They didn't really go to sleep after all.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm back! I think this is the longest I've gone without an update since I started these stories. I'm not losing interest, just had a hard time this month and real life has been getting me down. I also wrote [this](#) other Billy/Steve story.

Next time: Billy makes a surprise new friend. :-)

10. Chapter Ten

Summary for the Chapter:

“Do *not* go into my fucking bedroom,” Billy warned Dustin.

Henderson made a face and turned back around. “I wasn't going to! I don't want to see what you guys have in there!”

“Oh, yeah, we got, like, a bunch of dildos and tarot cards and some satanic candles, you should be really scared,” Steve told him. Billy wondered what exactly Steve wanted to do with a bunch of dildos and when Billy was gonna find out about it.

Henderson grimaced like a cartoon. “That's not funny, no you don't!”

“Now who's being homophobic?” Sinclair asked him.

“Uh, I'm not, it's called boundaries, Lucas!”

“Billy does have a candle, I bought it for him,” Max put in.

Sinclair started laughing his head off. “Really? I bet it's like lavender or something.”

“Fuck you,” Billy said. It was vanilla actually.

Chapter Ten

Billy got the cat because of Max and Henderson. He ended up

keeping it because of Steve and Jane.

It was late on Thursday afternoon and Billy was looking forward to a great night of doing fucking nothing. Doing fucking nothing was okay sometimes – after all, his old man had always said he was a real layabout. He'd been supposed to go out to dinner with Harrington or something but Steve had had to work late so Billy told him tomorrow was good too.

Steve had all these fancy ideas about dates and shit; they'd been out a few times over the last couple of weeks. It was kinda weird. Well it was cool and all but it was weird. Billy'd thought before that he wasn't really good at doing all that romantic shit – he *knew* he wasn't good at that shit – but it was kinda nice to get taken out or whatever. Harrington had been a real sweetheart to him lately; Billy was trying to be nice back. He hoped it was kinda working.

Anyway Steve had called him at work to say sorry and to reschedule. He was like a real gentleman or some shit – Billy didn't need a phone call. He told Steve that he was just sittin' around up front til five-thirty so then Steve'd talked on for twelve minutes even though he'd said he was super busy and was hopin' to leave by eight. Billy counted the minutes on the big clock on the shop wall.

Harrington's old man had been in the office today bugging him (Billy was pretty sure that was why he was stayin' late); in ten days he was going out to some business convention and he'd said that Steve should go with him for once. "I should probably go, right? I mean he's never actually asked me to go or anything, they went to the same place last year too I think." Minute thirteen and Steve was still goin' on.

"If you think he ain't gonna piss you off or anything, why not."

"Yeah, I don't know," Steve said thoughtfully. Billy could just about picture him at his job: sittin' at his cute little desk, wearin' his cute little shirt and his cute little tie. He probably had a coffee or some shit too, chewing on his pen and scribbling on his paperwork. What the fuck it was so hot. "It'll probably be really fancy and all, I've only been to Chicago like two other times. I can get you, like, a shirt with a pizza on it."

“You gonna take a plane out there?”

“Uh, no, I don't think so. It's only like a three-hour drive or something, my dad gets a rental car. He told me I can drive his Lincoln,” Harrington told him; it had *seat warmers*. It was summer anyway but Steve said that didn't matter.

“Okay. Want me to make you a tape or something?”

“A tape? What, like with music on it?” Billy loved him and all but Stevie was a little slow sometimes.

“Yeah, a mix tape, dummy.”

“Oh, gee,” Steve said like a little nerd. “I don't know, if you want. Uh, I don't think – “ he went quiet for a moment – “yeah, I don't – nobody ever really made me a tape before.” There was no fuckin' way that was true.

“Oh, well, lucky you,” Billy told him anyway. “I make great tapes, you'll like it.”

Steve laughed at him. “Whatever, it doesn't matter. You don't have to do that.”

“Just said I would.”

“Yeah, you don't really have the attention span for that,” Steve told him kindly; Billy felt insulted. “I think it's for like three days or something, what'll you do while I'm gone? Won't you miss me too much?” Harrington was such a fucking flirt.

“Think I'll be okay for three days.” Max was gonna be out in California around then too; it'd be so quiet.

“Okay, well, I think we come back on a Saturday, right after is my mom's fancy party. You can meet my dad again at that. Well, if I don't kill him out in Illinois. I don't think anyone will really miss him. Maybe his secretary. Actually, actually I bet he's tryin' to get out of going to my mom's thing.” Jesus Steve could really talk.

Hank came leaning out of the back doorway of the garage to spy on

Billy and make comments so Billy had to quit acting like a little dope in love talkin' on the phone. He probably looked stupid as shit leaning on the counter with some dumbass grin on his face. "Hey man, I'm on company time here."

"Oh, no, you're right, I gotta go too, sorry," Steve said. Somehow he talked for three more minutes; apparently his lunch hour had been real exciting. "Okay, I'm done, do you wanna go out tomorrow instead? Oh, you know what, I always forget you have that class, we could just, uhhhh, do you wanna rent a movie or something?"

"Yeah, whatever you want. Just come over." Hank leaned out of the doorway even further and spied some more. Billy was lucky fuckin' Miles wasn't there too for once. Not that Harrington made a habit of calling him at work or whatever but still. "I gotta go, okay?"

"Okay. Okay, see you later. Bye."

Hank started locking up the garage; it was five-fifteen by now. "Got a new girlfriend, Bill?"

"Nah, that was just my friend," Billy told him. He actually felt kind of guilty in like a minute. He wasn't sure if it was over lying about Steve or lying about it to Hank. What the fuck was he supposed to do, tell his fifty year old boss that he was a huge queer. That'd go so great.

"Your buddy Steve takin' good care of you?"

Billy felt seriously fucking weird. Hank couldn't know; there was no way he would know. Then again, Billy guessed pretty much everybody knew Harrington was about the only friend he had. "I don't need nobody to take care of me," he said like a cranky bitch. Hank actually fucking laughed at him. "Hey, sorry. I don't need to be on the phone like that."

"I don't give a shit what you do, Bill. Maybe if ya look busy up here no more assholes will come in and bother us," Hank said like he hadn't been bitching his head off all week that business had been slow. He muttered to himself: "Askin' me can I have the goddamn radiator changed out by the end of the day." He raised his voice. "You think I got a supply shop in the back, Bill?"

“No. When you gonna let me get back in the garage?” Billy asked him. For the last two weeks, Hank had been forcing him to sit up front for most of the day, dealing with customers and learning to write out receipts 'the proper way' (not like Hank ever fucking did anything the proper way himself). At the end of July Miles was gonna show him the payroll books for three days. It was gonna be so fun.

Hank was looking through a car magazine on the counter and not taking him seriously. He had a big black smear of grease on the top of his bald head from the Chevy he'd been working on and he looked like an idiot. “I dunno, maybe when you stop rubbin' your goddamn arm every five minutes.”

Billy almost rubbed his arm and then scowled. He was pretty sure Hank was like losin' money or time or something keeping him up front. He hadn't got hired to sit up front. “Man, I'm good. What you want, another fucking doctor's note?”

Hank continued to not take him seriously. “You know I wasn't much older than you when I threw my back out the first time, worked at a junkyard with my old man. He pushed me real hard. I ain't need to do that shit to you.”

First off Hank wasn't his dad. Second: “Thought you hurt your back when you was in the service.”

“Ha ha,” said Hank. “I got a lotta stories, Bill. What's wrong, ain't you excited to work with my brother?”

“Not really,” Billy said like a sulky bitch. He added, “You got dirt on your head.”

Hank laughed at him some more. Billy pulled the magazine away from him and then they closed up the front together. Hank checked the front door twice; he'd said before that it'd looked like somebody had been screwing with the lock a couple weeks ago when Billy hadn't been around. Probably just kids lookin' to get high off some of the chemicals, but Hank said it wouldn't be the first time people had fucked around with the shop.

“Bill, what day's your stepmom comin' in to pay me for her car next

week?" Hank asked as he put his keyring in his pocket. "I gotta look nice for her." He made a gross clicking noise with his tongue.

"Man, you're a piece of shit, shut the hell up," Billy begged him. "You can't look nice anyway." Hank roared his horrible laugh and set off down the street.

"Later, kid," he said as they parted ways. "Have a good night." He got into his truck and Billy wandered down the street towards home. His car was still pretty fucked up and he hadn't been taking it to work; was less than a ten minute walk from where his apartment was at though. Harrington made him feel like a goddamn girl about twice a week asking him if he needed a ride into the shop or something. It started rainin' pretty hard on him so Billy walked a little faster.

Joyce Byers waved at him from inside as he passed the general store. He thought about goin' in for a minute and bugging her but decided not to. He didn't know how late Max was working and he didn't feel like dealing with any of her shit today. She'd been avoiding him like he had the plague for most of the week anyway after she'd gone about blabbing all of his business over the 4th of July.

It was quiet when he finally got into the apartment building and unlocked his door. Cold air from the AC blasted at him right away; no Max which meant no headache. Eliane was there, though, wearing one of her amazing outfits (a shapeless jean dress with no sleeves and purple buttons) and reading one of her little books on the couch closest to the TV. Her dark hair was down past her shoulders now and it was real puffy from the heat and the rain outside. She must have just gotten here too. Billy guessed he looked similarly great.

She was still always around the apartment which was okay. Billy liked being around her even though it usually meant that Henderson or Wheeler Jr was there too yapping their goddamn heads off and arguing with him. She'd mostly been coming over on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons after she had her tutoring sessions. Hopper'd got her set up with some older lady out in Two Forks who'd used to teach elementary school. Tuesdays Jane was usually in a real mood because of math and social studies; Billy didn't blame her. Thursday was a little better 'cause she got to do her reading.

Last week she'd stayed over on Tuesday night on account of the chief finally gettin' around to taking Mrs. Byers out. Henderson had said if they got married then Will and El would be brother and sister and Will would be Hopper-Byers. That'd been some kinda big hilarious deal and the kids hadn't shut up about it all night. Maxine and Wheeler (also on Billy's shit list currently) had tried to teach Jane fractions with a pizza and Wheeler'd ended up with mushrooms in his hair; Billy still felt happy from it.

"Hey man," he said to her. He was hoping he wouldn't wind up with any food in his hair. "What you got?"

Elijane showed him her book. It was some Beverly Cleary book with a little cat or somethin' on the cover. He tried hard to look interested. "Any good?"

"It's okay." God she still never fuckin' said too much; Billy took a moment to feel enamored by her.

He went to the fridge and got himself a beer, then crashed down on the couch across from her. He took his jean jacket off and put his boots up on the coffee table. "Where's your old man at?"

"He has to work late. He's trying to get out of the police conf ... conference in two weeks."

"You hangin' out with me?" Billy guessed he could still do fuck-all with Jane around.

"If it's okay. I have to be home at eight one-five for dinner." Billy looked up sharply at her and she sent him a big ol' frown back. "Eight *fif-teen*," she corrected herself.

"Good girl," Billy told her. "You know where my sister's at?" Even if she was a little asshole he still needed to know where she was at.

"I think she's at work still."

"Okay. Wanna play Donkey Kong?" Harrington had brought his Nintendo over a couple nights ago. Max and Sinclair'd played it and screamed at each other until eleven-thirty; Billy had blown Steve in his room twice, then they'd ate a pizza together in their underwear.

“When I finish my book.”

“Yeah, all right.” Billy put on a rerun of Tuesday night's baseball game. He and Steve had missed that 'cause of the two blowjobs thing. God the Angels were still for shit this year too.

Jane read her book for a while and Billy watched the game and drank his beer. He was being kind of a pussy but he guessed he missed Steve or whatever; he'd been over almost every night since last Friday which was good. They'd also started hooking up again which was *really* good. Steve had been real nice to him lately and all.

Billy didn't really know what he got out of it. He wished he could think of something nice to do for Steve too.

He guessed he would survive for a night without Harrington. He really didn't feel like going out to some fancy dinner or something anyway; he was fucking tired and he didn't feel like takin' a shower. His shoulder still kinda hurt even though he hadn't done shit at work all day. The doctor out in Hamilton had said it would probably be like that for a while. He had had a torn ligament or something. Ripped up really. He was lucky, people kept saying.

Okay so no fancy dinner but he was still kinda hungry. Jane was supposed to be home at past eight which seemed late for a little kid to eat. He wondered if he was like supposed to give her a snack or something – he didn't know how to be a fuckin' babysitter. Hopper just kinda let her come over all the time, and it wasn't like he left Billy an instruction manual. He didn't really have any kid-friendly snacks or whatever; he had beer and hot wings in his freezer. Then again the chief probably just fed her fuckin' soda and beef jerky and those frozen waffles.

Harrington had been buying him a bunch of food and shit for his place; maybe they could go out grocery shopping together or something. Steve usually fucking ate everything in about thirty hours anyway. Except grocery-shopping was like what married couples did or whatever and they definitely weren't married. Steve would probably like that corny shit though. Anyway they could –

The door crashed open and Maxine and Henderson fell into the living

room; Elijane jumped a little and almost dropped her book. Billy sat up and tried his hardest to look like they hadn't just startled the fuck out of him too.

Max and Dustin stared at him. They were both soaking wet from the storm outside and looked as cute as two drowned rats. Henderson's ugly baseball cap was falling off his head. "Hey Billy! Hey El!" he said loudly.

Billy stared back at him suspiciously. "What're you doing here?"

"What?" He took a step behind Maxine. She was backing up too and they both tripped over each other like idiots.

"I said what're you doing here."

Max's hair was plastered to her skull and her grubby yellow hoodie was almost grey with rainwater. "Wh – what are *you* doing here?" she yelled at him. She clutched her backpack in front of her in a weird way, like she was protecting herself from him.

Billy licked his lips and looked at her; she was a fucking piece of work. He knew she wasn't scared of him no matter how he'd been acting this week. "Funny thing, I live here. What're you doing?" he asked her again.

Max's eyes were about the size of silver dollars. She and Henderson exchanged a glance; they looked all guilty and shit. "Nothing! I just – had to get my, um – I, I thought you were going out with Steve!"

"Had to work late." Billy was eyeing her backpack and feeling more suspicious. School was out, and she had enough shit here at his place. "What you got?"

"What? Nothing!"

"Yeah, sure. What you guys doin', screwing around on Sinclair?"

They both made horrible faces. "NO! As if!"

"Think before you speak!" Henderson yapped. "I have a girlfriend, Billy!"

"That don't mean nothing," Billy told him; Max rolled her eyes all around the goddamn room. "What you doing?"

Maxine scowled and made one of her gremlin faces at him. "I'm not doing anyth – " Her backpack shifted in her arms and she made the best face Billy'd ever seen in his life.

He sat up a little more which made his arm hurt. "The fuck's that?"

"What? Nothing!" She clutched her backpack again in a terrified way.

"Listen, Billy, please be open-minded about this," Henderson yapped; Max's backpack meowed plaintively and everyone froze. El sat up too.

"What the *fuck*, Max!" Billy burst out.

"What? I didn't do anything!"

"Yeah, okay, what'd I just hear comin' out your backpack?"

Max's eye twitched like a cartoon. "What are you talking about? You're hearing things, maybe you should lie down," she yelped just as Henderson said suavely, "Uh, that was me. Excuse me."

"Shut the fuck up," Billy told him. "What the shit is th – "

The backpack meowed again; Maxine looked stricken. "It's just – "

"No, no way," Billy told her. "I don't even wanna see that shit, get it out of my fuckin' apartment *right now*."

El closed her book and climbed up off the couch. "You have a cat?" she asked.

Henderson smiled his Wookiee smile. "He's really cute," he told her.

"What the fuck, Max!" Billy said again.

Max held onto her backpack like Billy was gonna chuck it out the window; really he had half a mind to. "He was outside in the alleyway by the comic shop!" she exclaimed. "He came right up to us

even though it was raining!”

“That’s really sweet, I don’t care.”

“Well we *can’t* take it to shelter because they’re full up and they might kill him!” Max dumped her backpack on the floor and knelt down beside it. “Just come look at him, he *is* really cute!”

Jesus Christ. The thing probably had rabies. “Max, are you fuckin’ five years old? You can’t bring a goddamn *cat* into my place.”

“Just for a few days!” She was making this awful face at him where she made her eyes all big, like when he’d lived back at home and she’d wanted to use his mom’s old record player or borrow five bucks off him. “*One* day, okay? We can’t keep him at Lucas’s house, his sister is allergic!”

“My mom said she’d want to take him but Tews is very territorial, I *just* got him to stop pissing in my bed this past April! We really can’t take on another animal right now,” Henderson yapped.

Billy didn’t care. “I don’t care.”

Max was purposefully ignoring him and trying to tug the cat out of her backpack; Billy had no clue how the fuck she’d squished him in there without getting scratched to all hell. “Just come look at him!”

God she thought she was real slick, trying to sneak over here when she’d thought he wouldn’t be home. “No. Get rid of it, I mean it.”

“But Billy – “

“I’m not playing around.”

“He’s covered in mud and looks sick! Can’t we just let him stay here until the storm’s over?”

“Yeah, no.”

Max picked the cat up and held it in her arms; Elijane actually gasped like she was watching a Disney movie or something. Billy almost gasped too because it was about the ugliest fucking thing he’d ever

seen in his life, and he'd seen Nancy Wheeler without all her makeup on during graduation practice. It didn't even look like a cat.

“What the fuck's wrong with it?”

“Uh, he's homeless, Billy!” Henderson lisped helpfully.

“No shit, looks like it has fucking mange or somethin'.”

“No he DOESN'T!” Max yowled in her womanly hysteria; Billy guessed she'd fucking bonded with the thing through her backpack on the way home from the comic book store or whatever. “He has plenty of fur! He's just – all wet from the rain! *And* he was in the dumpster!”

“Can I hold it?” Elijane asked her.

“Sure!”

Billy lamented his life. He forced himself to actually sit up and take his boots off the coffee table; the chief would fucking murder him if he let Jane go and get bit by some mangy cat with rabies. He wondered if Hop had medical insurance for her. “No, you can't frickin' hold it!” he yelled like a den dad.

Jane looked at him in defiance; her face said she was totally going to hold it. Billy ignored her and turned back to Max. “You brought a goddamn dumpster cat in here?”

Max bristled. “It was empty anyway!”

“That's beautiful.” Billy could feel the fleas crawling on him already. “Yeah, Max, sorry, you gotta get rid of that thing, my landlord sees that – “

“She won't come here!”

“ – she's gonna flip her shit, did that thing fuckin' scratch you or anything?”

“No! He didn't scratch me! He's friendly!”

“Uh, really, that's kind of debatable,” Henderson put in. Billy noticed

for the first time that his shirt sleeve was all torn up.

“*MRRROW*,” said the thing that was supposed to be a cat. It looked like a fuckin' goblin or one of those gremlin things from that Christmas movie.

God it was so ugly. Max clutched it even more and Billy glared at it.

First off it was way too big to be a cat; Max looked stupid as shit trying to hold it under one arm. Looked like a huge Maine Coon or something except it was way too fucking hideous to be some fancy breed. Its fur was black or brown or something or maybe it was just mud. Its big demon tail swung dangerously, well part of it did. Christ maybe it was paralyzed. One ear was half-bitten off, and – “What the fuck's wrong with its eye?”

“We think it only has one eye, kinda like a pirate,” Henderson put in, still helpfully. “He has a huge scar, come look at it!”

“Oh my god, that thing has *fucking* rabies,” Billy decided. “Get it the fuck outside.”

“No!” Max yelped all worked up. “It's going to hail out tonight, he'll probably die!”

“Might be better for it,” Billy said; Maxine actually growled at him. “How the fuck's it supposed to hail?”

She was making the stupid big-eyed face at him again and Elijane was looking at him too. “Oh, my god, Billy, *please!* Can we just let him stay here for one night? He *doesn't* have rabies, look at him!” She jostled the hellcat against her waist and it made another weird demon noise.

“Yeah, lookin' at him is *not* fucking helping his case,” Billy told her.

Max puffed up and changed her act in two seconds. She made another face. This was not her cutesy *Please Billy Let Me Use Your Record Player* face – this was the one said that he was the worst in the world; he was a piece of shit and he *definitely* wasn't her brother. “You're not FAIR! If – if I brought home a dog or something, you'd be all over it!”

“Yeah, well, a dog's a dog,” Billy told her – that was different, and it wasn't true anyway.

It wasn't like he didn't like animals. He liked most animals aside from slugs or snails or poisonous spiders. Dogs were the best but cats were okay too even if they were for girls or whatever. He didn't have time to take care of a pet, though, or to make sure Max took care of a pet. Harrington had to leave early *every* morning to check his fucking dogs, *and* they were the best, *and* he lived at home with his parents (in theory, at least). “That ain't a dog.”

“*Whatever.*” Max pursed her mouth up and glared at him. “You know what, I **THOUGHT** you might actually have a heart about something other than your *stupid* boyfriend, but I **GUESS NOT!**”

“Wow, Max, really?” Henderson said.

“What?!”

“Uh, that is my best friend you're talking about, please do not reduce Steve to just Billy's lover, he is way more than that!”

Jesus Christ. Truly Billy felt offended (and also fucking horrified at Henderson's use of the word 'lover'). Max was at about a level seven in her hysteria now – since he'd actually been abducted and shit he wasn't too scared of her no more, but goddamn if he didn't feel kinda bad. He totally had a heart, not just for Steve or whatever. His lover. Jesus. “Okay, you know what, you can take your fucking cat and – “

“I guess I'll just put him back outside, **MAYBE I SHOULD THROW HIM OFF THE FIRE ESCAPE SO HE JUST DIES!**”

“You ain't gotta be fuckin' dramatic,” Billy told her.

“I'm *not* being dramatic! I **JUST** thought I could keep him here for **ONE NIGHT** while we figured out what to do with him! I only work until one tomorrow, we were gonna get rid of him before the weekend!”

“Yeah, I bet. Really sad for you.”

“God, you're *such* a jerk!”

“Hmm.” Billy put his feet back up on the coffee table. “Take him back home then.”

“Mom said no!”

“Oh, gee. Wonder why.”

Her nostrils actually flared. “All *right!* I *said* I’d get rid of – “

“Really? You really won’t let him stay here?” Henderson sounded disappointed too, not that Billy cared. Even so he bet Dustin was gonna run right to Harrington and tell him all about what a heartless bastard Billy was. “Is this because of what Max said before about your eyebrows?”

“MAN, I FUCKING TOLD YOU NOT TO TALK ABO – “

“Because we all did a poll and we think they look great!” Henderson yammered on; Billy moaned and put one of the pillows from the couch over his face. “If you guys are still fighting, you shouldn’t let this affect your decision!”

“We’re *not* fighting!” That was Max.

“Think about Eleven! She’s probably never seen a real cat before in her life!”

Billy took the pillow off his face. “She’s seen a fucking cat before, she’s readin’ about one right now,” he told Henderson. “Thought you said you had a cat at your place anyway.”

“Tews always hides in our creepy basement when people come over! He has to take anxiety tablets!”

“Wait, what?” Max said.

Elijane was still standing stock-still in front of the smaller couch, about four feet away from Max and her little demon monster, and right across from Billy and the coffee table. Her kids’ book was rolled up tight in her right hand; the spine was gonna split. She looked over at Billy and then looked back at the demon monster. “I’ve ... I’ve seen a cat before,” she said slowly.

“See?”

“Really? Where? Did it look like this one?” Henderson asked her.

“Nothing fuckin' looks like that one,” Billy said; Maxine scowled anew at him.

“I saw it at home.”

Henderson looked blank which was his usual expression. “Uh, Hopper has a cat?”

“Papa brought it to me,” Jane said; Billy thought, *Christ*. “But he ... wanted me to hurt it. Then he took it away.”

Max and Henderson stared at her, then they stared at Billy. The demon cat hung loosely in Max's arms and made an ugly growling sound; its one good ear was pressed tightly against his head.

“Billy!” Henderson said. “El's never had a pet or anything in her life. Look at her!” Billy looked at her. “Aren't you guys like best friends or something? You should keep it here for her!”

“I ain't allowed to have a pet here.”

“You let *us* stay here all the time,” Maxine pointed out. “And we're, like, way louder and more annoying. No one will even notice him!” She kinda had a point. The kids stared at him some more.

“El's never even petted a cat in her life! Are you really going to deprive her of that moment?” Henderson yapped.

Goddamnit. Goddamnit. The kids kept on looking at him and making him feel fucking stupid; Jane looked all sad and shit. Billy could feel himself breaking. Christ he was such a bleeding heart; he was so goddamn easy.

He scowled with all the fucking brats staring at him and working him over; he probably looked like a goddamn idiot. He leaned forward and slammed his beer down on the coffee table. The cat jumped in Maxine's arms and she nearly toppled over. “Well she ain't gonna fuckin' pet it with it looking like that,” Billy said.

The kids rejoiced and went to try and give the cat a bath to clean it up; Billy turned off his emotions (all three of them) and decided to be amused by them. One night was okay and then he'd drive 'em out to South Bend or Marion County tomorrow and put the thing in a fuckin' shelter.

He sat up on the kitchen counter, close to the fridge, and watched Dustin and Max struggle with the ugly monster tryin' to get it into the sink. Henderson got scratched to shit as soon as Max turned the tap on. "OKAY, HE IS REALLY AGGRESSIVE! BILLY, CAN YOU COME OVER HERE?"

"Nope." Billy lit up a cigarette.

"Oh, that is *so great*." Maxine glared at him as if she hadn't fucking hawked four of his cigs on Wednesday morning when she'd been avoiding him; Harrington didn't smoke menthols and anyway he knew better than to take Billy's smokes. She had mud on her face from the demon cat trying to do a backflip on her.

Billy ignored her being a piece of shit to him. "You fucking owe me, Maxine," he told her. "You owe me so much goddamn weed for this."

"Okay, okay! Whatever you want!" She made a horrible face as the cat clung desperately to her sweatshirt sleeve.

"Not just that cheap shit that Beverly gets."

"Okay, I'll get it off creepy Norman at work again."

Billy blinked. "What?"

"What?" Max looked up at him all angelic.

It took the kids fucking forever to clean the cat up. Once they were done, there was dirt and hair and some of Henderson's blood all over the sink, and Billy felt a little cheered up. Maxine said that she thought the cat was actually a girl, and she and Henderson got into a real big argument over it.

Girl or boy, the thing looked even uglier with the mud washed off it. It really *did* have one eye like a fucking pirate and its whiskers were all screwed up. It had kinda long hair and it puffed up like a cotton ball in two seconds. Max dried it off with a towel for a couple minutes until it swiped at her and ran off and squished itself under the coffee table. Max and El went right after it and it made another one of its weird growling sounds.

“Yo, leave that thing the fuck alone,” Billy barked out. The girls ignored him; they were too busy yelping and giggling with each other. Elijane turned into a real fucking girl around Maxine. It was so terrible.

Whatever. Billy smoked his cigarette and glared at them. Let it scratch the hell out of them if they wanted to frickin' ignore him. Maybe Elijane would get tired of it then and *she'd* toss it out the window.

“We should name it after you since it's so grouchy,” Dustin told Billy; Billy didn't know why Henderson was still standin' next to him. He started laughing a lot. “Billy the Cat, get it? Like Billy the Kid? It's funny.”

“Fuck you.” Billy slid off the counter. That was kinda his nickname for Will in his head.

“See?”

Billy ignored him and stalked back over into the living room. Neither of the girls looked up at his commanding presence and he felt a little pissed off. “You got twenty-four hours, man,” he told Max.

“Okay, I know!” She was sitting beside the coffee table lookin' all pleased (and with three scratches on her cheek) like she'd really worked him over or something. Christ she was so fucking annoying; really all the kids were ruining his night.

He turned to Elijane, who was trailing a shoelace along the rug in front of the table in hopes of lurin' the little spawn of Satan out. “All right, yeah. I gotta take you home now.”

“But you said I could – “

“I don't care, it's after nine o'clock.” He felt like a fucking den dad again. He should probably stop making fun of Harrington.

“Okay. Fine.” She looked all sulky and shit; she went to the couch and got her little backpack ready, then followed him out to his smashed-up car. It was still raining pretty hard but neither of them hurried up.

El stared at him as he snapped his seatbelt on and started down the main drag. “Can I come back tomorrow and see the cat?”

“It ain't gonna be there no more,” Billy reminded her.

Her little brows went down. “You said twenty-four hours!”

Jesus Christ. “Whatever, I don't care.”

“Maybe Jim will take it.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Billy really doubted it.

It only took a couple minutes to get her back to the chief's house; nobody was out because of the rain and the neighborhood looked grey and dead. It was almost too weird. When Billy reached Jane's place, a lot of the lights were on inside and Hopper was sitting on the porch waiting for her. He was smoking a cigarette and looked annoyed; Billy felt slight true terror. He parked up on the gravel driveway close to the steps.

Jane got her backpack on and opened up the car door. “Bye Billy.”

“Yeah, later.”

“Jim said he has to give you pizza money.”

Billy felt weird; he really didn't feel like talkin' to the chief again. They'd already had some big conversation the other week after he'd graduated. “Don't worry about it.”

“Okay.” She got out of the car and stood in the rain looking at him

with her big eyes like a weird little insect. The wind and rain whipped her hair around her face. "I hope you get to see Steve tomorrow."

Jesus. She was still too nosy. "Ain't ya going in?" Billy asked her.

"Yes. I'll ask about the cat."

"Whatever." Billy waited until she got up to the porch and then he drove himself back home. Henderson was gone by now but Max was still around watching the TV, laying on her back on the floor with the heels of her dirty Keds kicked up on the coffee table.

The demon monster was perched on the arm of the couch like it already fucking lived there. Billy glared at it. The cat stared back at him with one creepy eye and twitched its fucked-up tail.

"Don't let that thing fucking piss in here," Billy warned Max.

"I'm *not*!" Max said. "I already took her outside!"

"Whatever." Max looked up at him skeptically and Billy stared back. "Fucking what."

"Are you still mad at me from before?"

Billy wasn't sure. He was tired anyway. "Guess not."

"Okay. Wanna play Donkey Kong?"

"I guess." He sat down next to her on the floor. Max handed him the controller.

The next morning the stupid cat was on the kitchen counter chomping on Maxine's trailing ivy plant; Billy lunged at it from across

the table and got a bruise on his hip for his efforts and a big fucking headache from Max wailing her head off that he was abusive.

“I ain't abusive,” Billy said. He yanked Max's hair as he went past her to the fridge which made her yell again.

Billy felt real grouchy. He leaned against the counter, eating his Poptart and glaring at Devil Hellbitch (the cat, not Maxine). He still couldn't tell if the thing was brown or black; its fur was all weird and blotchy. It was sitting by the dishwasher cleaning itself and lookin' back at him with its one demon eye. It was real skinny even with the stupid fluffy hair. Maybe it'd been someone's pet before and they'd chucked it because it was a bitch from hell.

“*Billy!*” Max went off on him at a dramatic level five. “Oh my god! Stop glaring at her, you're like a *child* or something! Just leave her alone!”

“I'm not even fucking doing anything!” Billy yelled back. He told her, “Look, you got the weekend to figure out what you're doing with it, after that it's going over the fire escape. I ain't buying any fucking kitty litter.”

“Really? It can stay until Sunday?”

“I just fucking said.”

“Okay!” She seemed satisfied by that and Billy knew that she thought she was workin' him over. She was *not* working him over because he was too smart for that. But he figured it'd just be easier than going through the whole thing with her again tonight. Now they could go through it on Sunday when he got the pleasure of tossin' the cat off the balcony.

When Billy got home from work the cat was still there but Max had got him some weed and a pizza so he didn't yell too much. Anyway it wasn't like he'd signed any adoption papers or nothing. She'd probably forget to feed it and it'd die over the weekend before he even got to chuck it out.

Sinclair was over too – Billy guessed he'd followed Max home or

something. He kinda remembered the very clear fact that Sinclair's parents hadn't exactly seemed to want the kid hangin' around Maxine for the better part of last year. Billy didn't know if that was cool now or if he was supposed to ask about it; really he didn't mind being ignorant. He didn't wanna get involved in all their drama.

Anyway he didn't mind Sinclair as much these days, definitely not as much as he minded as Henderson or Wheeler Jr, so it was okay if he was over. He and Billy laughed at Max as she tried, real serious, to roll up a joint on the coffee table; Billy gave up on her and took over after a couple minutes.

He took a drag and then handed it over to Lucas. Sinclair held the joint much like one would hold a lump of dogshit and tried to take a puff. He was making a horrible face all the while. Billy wondered if they was peer pressurin' him or something.

"What you doin' about your fuckin' monster?" Billy asked Max. He nodded over towards where the hideous cat was padding back and forth down the little hallway in a kind of clumsy way. It laid its ears down and narrowed its good eye when it saw the both of them looking at it, then lumbered off into the bathroom.

"I don't know. She might be somebody's pet!"

Lucas finally finished coughing and choking over the weed. He passed it back to Billy. "Um, yeah, I really doubt that thing is someone's pet." Billy laughed and Max made a face at him.

"Well, anyway, I called El and Hopper said she could come over and we could make flyers tonight!" Apparently the chief was not taking the cat.

"Don't put my number on those flyers," Billy warned her.

"What am I supposed to do, use Hopper's phone number? He'd kill us!"

Billy rolled his eyes and took another drag off the joint. "I don't want a buncha assholes callin' me over a stupid cat," he mumbled around it.

“Yeah, if she puts that thing's face on the flyer? Don't worry, no one's going to call you,” Sinclair told him; Max scowled again and slugged him hard. “OW, it was a JOKE!”

Max rolled her eyes and switched tactics in a minute. She turned back to Billy. “Hey, are you going out with Steve tonight?” she asked hopefully. Jesus Christ she was a little horndog; Billy knew she was just waitin' to use his apartment to hook up with Sinclair.

He smoked some more. “Thought you said you were hangin' out with Eleven.”

“I am! I'm just asking!”

“Stevie's bringing me a movie.”

“Oh my god, he's *totally* going to bring over *Top Gun* or something,” Lucas said happily. Billy started laughing again. Sinclair said in a stupid voice: “Uh, you know, my mom says I look like Tom Cruise, uh, Billy, do you think I look like Tom Cruise?”

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Billy said; he was still laughing. Harrington did say that corny shit all the time but he might be be real embarrassed if he heard Sinclair makin' fun of him to Billy.

“You guys are so mean,” Max said like she didn't rip on Steve every two seconds otherwise.

“I'm not doing anything,” Billy told her. Max rolled her eyes and turned the TV up.

Billy got stoned pretty fast and watched the TV; it was this rerun of *A Different World* on NBC. Back when he'd lived at home, his old man woulda flip his shit if he'd ever caught Max or Billy watchin' something like that. Jesus Christ if he ever came in here. Anyway now they could smoke a joint at 5pm and watch whatever they wanted even with Sinclair around.

There was a lotta things Billy could be doing instead of watching *A Different World*. He didn't know when Harrington was supposed to come around – he should take a shower and try to look like less of a grease-ball. His hair was already growing too fast and he looked

stupid. He should probably clean his place up a little or something. He should remind Max that she was still on thin fuckin' ice with him over the stupid cat. He should practice his amazing literature skills (94 for the year) and read those papers that Hopper had given him last week. He should really do that last one.

He'd asked the chief before if he could find out anything about that little girl who had been there with him and Jane last month when they'd been – whatever. He hadn't even really thought Hopper would remember or anything; he'd asked him a while ago, maybe the first week he'd got his apartment. He definitely hadn't expected him to pull up a whole fuckin' file on her.

Hop had given the papers to Billy last week at his graduation party. *You sure you want 'em?* he'd asked and Billy had said yeah. He wasn't really sure if he wanted them though.

He felt like – well, he felt a lot of things. He felt like he should know who she was or where she'd come from or something, that kid. It felt really important that he should know. If she'd had a family or something Hopper'd probably gone to them already and taken care of it.

It was just that Billy wanted to know about her. It was stupid really. He just wanted to know. She'd been in his head too and shit; she was just another little kid. Maybe she was just like Jane, Eleven. It was just that she'd been *so* little and he couldn't see how she'd – shit. Whatever. How she'd lived like that or how long she'd lived like that. He just wanted to know about her. He could still feel that *snap* in his head; it'd made the ground shake.

It was so fuckin' horrible and he thought about it every night. And then they'd just – and she wasn't – anyway Billy'd thought maybe he'd feel better if he could know some stuff about her. If he could know who she was. Maybe he could – like, it would make up for it or something. Not really but it would make it matter.

It didn't even make any sense. But nobody was talking about it. The kids didn't know, not really – maybe Wheeler, if Jane had told him about it. Steve still didn't know; nobody was talking about it. Jane wasn't talking about it and Billy didn't know how he felt about her

not talking about it. It wasn't like *he* wanted to talk about it. He just felt like he should know.

Except now that he had all those papers and Hopper had said *You sure you wanna know* Billy didn't really wanna know. He felt too crazy; he'd stuffed all the papers in his dresser like a little idiot, smoked a cigarette lookin' at the closed drawer. He *really* didn't wanna know.

He should probably read them so he'd know. It wasn't his fault but it – it felt like it was his fault or something. It still felt like it was his fault. How could it not have been his fault? Everything leading up to it was.

If he hadn't gone off with Jane like a crazy retard. Or if he hadn't gotten into that stupid fucking fight with Harrington and all that. If he hadn't been a racist prick. If he hadn't said those things he'd said to Steve, about Steve. Harrington thought he'd still meant it. If he'd just been able to ... not be an asshole for five fucking minutes. If he'd timed everything a little different probably none of it would've happened. He could have just taken Jane home. Except then the kid – that girl – would still be with those people, but maybe alive. *Get rid of her*. They'd killed her, and he could still hear it. And it was just –

“Billy? Are you okay?” The joint was burning through the leg of his jeans; Billy startled and almost dropped it onto his thigh.

Max was next to him on the couch, gazing at him with a weird expression on her little face. She looked about ten years old lookin' at him. She took the joint away from him and frowned. “What's wrong with you?”

“Nothin'.” There was a new hole in his Garbage Pail Kid jeans now. Billy stared down at it. He felt kinda blank, like he was about to freak out or something; he felt his breath catch in his throat as if he was gonna choke.

Okay no. No. He wasn't gonna do that here. He hadn't done that in so long, not even when he'd been – “I'm just tired, man.”

“Okay.” She kept on looking at him and for a second he was scared

she wasn't gonna drop it and let him go. But then she did drop it. "Just checking."

"Yeah, I'm good."

Billy watched the TV for a couple minutes. *A Different World* ended and then the news came on; he watched the weather report until he felt okay again. Maybe he shouldn't be thinking about this shit. It was Friday night and it was summer. He should feel okay. He should be –

The front door opened across the room and broke him out of his thoughts again; Steve was coming in with Henderson trailing behind him like a big goon and holdin' his backpack. "Hey-o, guess who I found out in the lobby, being a weird person."

"Hey guys," Henderson said. "How's our friend?" Then he said, "OOH, WHOSE PIZZA?" and made a beeline for the kitchen.

Billy looked at Steve and felt cheered up in a couple seconds. It was lame that lookin' at Harrington could do that to him but whatever. Steve looked really good like usual – he had *definitely* showered, unlike Billy. Steve's hair was all shiny and floppy and he had jeans on instead of his work getup. He had his third most amazing polo on, the maroon one. He was smiling and then he made a face, looking at Maxine puffing away on what was left of the joint.

"Oh my god, Bill, really?" he said; in two seconds he transformed into Mr. Mom. Billy didn't feel any less happy though. "It's like five o'clock, guys. Should she really be doing that?"

"Steve, I'm right here, I can speak for myself!" Max snapped. Billy said, "What, I ain't makin' her do nothing."

Harrington flopped down next to him on the couch. "Yeah, okay. Hi," he said unnecessarily. He gave Billy a real nice smile.

"Hey," Billy said.

Steve put a finger in the new hole in Billy's jeans. "What happened to your pants?"

"Wow, you just look at his pants in three seconds," Sinclair

commented like a shitheel.

“Screw you, shithead!!”

“Billy's stoned, he burned himself,” Max informed Steve.

Billy felt a little spacey. “I'm not stoned,” he said. Jesus Steve was real pretty though, well he always was. Okay maybe he was a little stoned.

“Did you burn yourself?” Steve asked him. He looked a little amused and was still touching Billy's leg. There were too many kids around.

“No.”

“Hmm, okay.” Steve's eyes were real big; Billy stared at him. “You want me check you?” Shit.

“Oh God, Steve, come on, stop!” Max begged him in disgust.

“Uh, Max, you're being homophobic,” Henderson said wisely from the kitchen with three pizza slices in his mouth.

“No I'm not! It's just because it's Steve and *Billy*!”

What a sweetheart. “You're such a bitch, Max,” Billy told her. It wasn't his fault she'd seen what she'd seen on Tuesday. After all she'd been avoiding him the whole weekend and he hadn't thought just she'd bust into the place. It was his apartment; he could do whatever he wanted to do to Steve (or to Steve's nipples, hahaha) on the couch.

“That's really nice, thanks Max. Why are you guys even all here? We have plans,” Steve said.

“Uh, you brought Dustin over here!”

“No he didn't, I was already here,” Henderson yapped. Max made a face at him and Steve stood up.

“Whatever. I gotta take a piss.” He was so romantic.

“Don't tell me about it!”

Steve scratched at his eyebrow with his middle finger and made Max laugh at him. He wandered away down the hall to the bathroom, then came back out two seconds later with wide eyes. "Okay, just wanna let you guys know, there is a large cat in your bathtub," he said slowly.

"Figures," Billy said.

"Oh! I forgot she went in there!" Max yapped.

Steve looked over at him. "You ... got a cat?" he asked blankly.

"No."

Steve made one of his cute faces; his eyebrows went up. "Oh, okay."

"Yes he did, that's what I was trying to tell you." Henderson was still eating the pizza.

"Right." Steve was still making the face. "How the hell did you get a cat in two days?"

"We found her behind the comic book shop!"

"It's not my fucking cat, it ain't staying here," Billy told him.

"It is til Sunday!" That was Max.

"Yeah, it's her problem."

Steve put his hands in his jeans pockets and glanced back at the hallway. "Okay, so is it like supposed to stay in there or something?"

"Not really," Max said. "She's kind of scared of everyone. She's probably eating my plant right now, she keeps doing that."

"Oh, okay." Harrington looked all excited and shit like a little nerd. "So ... I can go pet her?"

Jesus. Maxine looked like he was really funny. "Um, you can try."

"Okay!" Harrington zoomed off back into the bathroom like a little geek.

Billy lamented his life. So much for their plans.

“Uh, Steve, she's *not* friendly!” Henderson was trying to follow him; Steve slammed the door shut in his face. “Wow! Okay!” He clomped back over to the living room and sat down next to Billy. “Don't worry, I'm not staying long, Rebecca and I have to get started on our summer reading,” he told Billy like Billy was supposed to care. “I just wanted to come over and see Chewy!”

Billy stared at him. “What the fuck is Chewy?”

“The cat, Billy!” Henderson yapped like he was dumb. “Because she looks like Chewbacca!”

Max gasped. “That is so cute!”

Jesus Christ. “Man, don't fucking name it,” Billy said in disgust. “We ain't keeping it.”

“Okay, but we have to call her something!”

“Yeah, no, we don't.”

The front door swung open and no one was there; everyone stopped and stared at it. A second later Jane came walking through. She looked around at everyone staring at her. “Where is the cat?” she said.

“El, you can just use the doorknob like a normal person,” Lucas told her; she ignored him.

“Hey Jane,” Billy said unnecessarily.

“Hi. Where is the cat?”

Jesus God. He was fucking chopped liver now apparently. Once upon a time she'd liked to hang out at the shop with him.

“Steve is being mauled in the bathroom right now,” Dustin told her.

“Ha ha, he usually has Billy for that,” Sinclair said.

Maxine made a face like she was going to throw up; Elijane looked a little blank. "Shut up! That's a communal area!"

"You don't know what we do when you ain't here," Billy said.

Max gave him a dark look. "Gee, I think I have an idea."

"*Please* don't talk about that again," Lucas begged her. The kids were so hilarious.

"What?" Dustin said; everyone ignored him.

Max and Lucas got up to see what was left of the pizza and Jane sat down next to Billy and Dustin on the couch. She took the remote from the coffee table, then put on some old black-and-white movie.

Steve was in the bathroom for a long time; maybe he'd forgotten about the stupid cat and was taking a shit or taking a shower or something. After a couple minutes more he came back out. He had a big dopey smile on his face and was holding the stupid cat in his arms. "Hey, look who I got," he said; all the kids flocked to him like a bunch of little monsters, even Sinclair. "Stop, get the fuck away from me!"

"Steve, how did you get her to let you pick her up?" Henderson was right in his face; the cat swiped at him and Steve almost dropped her.

"Get the fuck away from me!" Steve said again. He collapsed on the couch next to Billy. "Animals love me, I had a cat before."

"Did you?" Billy asked him.

"For like a week. Does she have any toys?"

Jesus. "It ain't a dog, it doesn't need any toys."

"Tews has a whole box of catnip, if you guys are going to keep Chewy I can bring some stuff over," Henderson said; he was way too close to Billy, leaning over the back of the couch.

Steve ignored him. He put the cat in Billy's face; its ears went down. "Do you see the cat?" he asked all nerdy.

“Get that thing outta my face,” Billy told him.

Harrington actually looked hurt and shit. “You don't think she's cute?”

“That ain't the word I would use.”

Steve glared at him and jostled the cat in his arms. “I like her, she came right over to me.” He made a gross sound with his mouth at it. The cat stared at him so he did it again.

Jesus God. “Quit doing that,” Billy begged him.

Steve laughed. Eleven came and sat down beside him and they petted the cat and made more gross sounds; Billy was turned off for the rest of his life. People got so fucking stupid about cats, even if they were ugly as shit apparently.

“Steve! Let me pet her!” Henderson was leaning over the back of the couch; he reached over Steve and tried to pick the cat up.

Harrington hunched over and held the monster like it was a little baby or something. He had cat hair on his collar. “Dustin, I swear to god – “

“STEVE, YOU'RE OVER-STIMULATING HER!”

“What? No I'm not! Go away!”

“Okay, well, I just want to – “ the cat swiped out with one demon leg and caught Henderson in the forearm – “SON OF A BITCH!” Dustin yelled. Steve elbowed Billy in the chest and dropped the cat. It hissed everywhere and tripped over Max's feet, then took off running into Billy's room.

“Oops, sorry,” Steve said to Billy. “You okay?”

“Yeah, whatever.” Henderson was trailing after the cat hopefully. “Do *not* go into my fucking bedroom,” Billy warned him.

Henderson made a face and turned back around. “I wasn't going to! I don't want to see what you guys have in there!”

“Oh, yeah, we got, like, a bunch of dildos and tarot cards and some satanic candles, you should be really scared,” Steve told him. Billy wondered what exactly Steve wanted to do with a bunch of dildos and when Billy was gonna find out about it.

Henderson grimaced like a cartoon. “That's not funny, no you don't!”

“Now who's being homophobic?” Sinclair asked him.

“Uh, I'm not, it's called boundaries, Lucas!”

“Billy does have a candle, I bought it for him,” Max put in.

Sinclair started laughing his head off. “Really? I bet it's like lavender or something.”

“Fuck you,” Billy said. It was vanilla actually.

The kids bugged them for awhile longer bein' homophobic and then Henderson and Sinclair finally set off for home; it was past nine. As soon as the front door closed again the demon cat came padding out of Billy's room. She'd probably sensed the loss of Henderson's annoying presence -- Billy sure felt better with him gone.

Max and El made a bunch of horrible girl noises and coaxed the horrible cat back onto the couch with them. “Are you staying over here, El?” Max asked excitedly. “Want to have a sleepover with me?”

“If it's okay.” They both looked over at Steve and Billy.

Billy guessed that Max was finished with avoidin' him. Anyway she had to be if she wanted to keep her stupid cat from going over the balcony. “Whatever.”

The girls ran off giggling to Max's room and finally left them alone on the couch. Steve stretched out and put his hands behind his head, leaning back against the couch cushion. He was looking at Billy with a stupid smile on his face. Billy felt pretty annoyed from all the kids bein' around but Steve still looked so good. “Bill, you want to have a sleepover with me?” he asked.

Shit he was so corny. Billy guessed he was trying to be cute or

whatever. "I guess."

"Okay, well, I owe you for Tuesday night," Steve told him. Oh. He meant the two blowjobs thing.

"What, that how this works?"

Steve laughed. "Uh, I don't know."

"You don't wanna go hang out with the girls and try to pet that bitch cat all night?" Billy was pretty sure he was kind of being a dick and he wasn't sure why. He should already be on Steve instead of sayin' dumb shit to him.

He guessed he still felt kind of weird from all the shit he'd been thinking of when he'd been smoking; the brats yelling for an hour hadn't really helped. He shouldn't be thinking about it. He had Harrington here now and he shouldn't be a prick to him.

"Not really. I'd rather be with you." Okay Billy was definitely being a dick. Steve just looked like he was being funny though. "Are you really gonna let Max keep that thing?"

"No."

"Okay." Steve looked like he was being even funnier.

"What?"

"Nothing. Am I allowed to kiss you now or what?"

Steve made him feel so fucking stupid; Billy didn't know what the hell Harrington wanted. Steve knew he could do whatever to him. "I guess."

"Really enthusiastic, it's great." Steve was still smiling but he had the big frown-wrinkle between his eyebrows too. "Hey, are you okay?"

Jesus Christ it was like every five seconds somebody was asking him if he was okay. Billy was always okay. "Yeah, c'mere." He grabbed the hem of Steve's shirt, then pulled him in and kissed him, probably too hard. Harrington kissed him back, then there was a strong hand

on his hip. It felt really good. Steve put his other hand in Billy's hair which reminded Billy that he was a giant greaseball right now; he almost pulled back.

It was dumb because he always wanted to look good for Harrington or – well, he meant to look good, but it usually didn't end up working out that way. Half the time it seemed like Billy was all busted up over something and now he had that big ugly fucking scar on his shoulder too. He and Steve had been hanging around each other for like a year now so Steve had seen him lookin' like shit plenty of times before. It shouldn't matter. Billy knew he looked okay and all; he knew he looked pretty good, in a way he guessed. But he could probably look better – like he could actually shave his face for once or something.

It was just that Steve looked so fucking perfect all the time; he looked so good all the time, even when he hadn't slept for two days and was being a cranky bitch or something. Billy didn't know how somebody could look so good all the time. Steve's fucking hair and his big eyes and his pretty face and his pretty mouth and shit he just looked so good. It was real shallow but it wasn't just, like, a sex thing or whatever. Every time he got to hang out with Harrington, Billy felt like ... he didn't know. It was too fucking corny. Shit it was like a treat or a gift or something, gettin' to just look at Steve and gettin' to be with him. Billy wanted him to feel the same way; he didn't know how to say it.

He guessed he had pulled back after all. “Hey, what's wrong?” Steve asked him.

“Nothin'.” He didn't know how to say it and it made his stomach feel all tight. “Missed you last night,” he made himself say. Admit.

Steve smiled at him like a big dope so Billy guessed it was the right thing to say. “Yeah, I missed you too.”

“I gotta shower,” Billy told him.

Steve kissed him some more. His mouth was so soft and Billy closed his eyes. “Mm, if you want. I don't care about that.”

“Wanted to look nice for you.”

Steve laughed like Billy'd said something funny. "You look okay," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Sure." He thought so. He felt pretty okay now anyway.

"What do you wanna do? Aside from, uh, showering." It was a communal area after all.

"Thought you was bringin' me a movie."

"Oh, right," Steve said. "I forgot it in my car."

"What you get, *Top Gun* or something?"

Steve looked blank. "Did you want that? I've already seen it four times." Billy tried not to laugh. "What?"

"Nothin'."

"Right, sure, I don't even want to know." Steve swung over and climbed on him on top of the couch. He put his big hands on the back of Billy's neck and threaded his fingers in Billy's hair; Billy played around with Steve's belt. "What do you wanna do?" he asked again. "Want me to get you some food?"

"Mm." Billy started to undo the belt. "Thought you owed me from Tuesday."

Steve laughed and tightened his grip on Billy's hair. God Steve made him feel so dizzy, or maybe it was still from the pot. Probably the pot. He was like in love or somethin'. "Okay, we can do that too."

They kissed again for a moment more, then there was a loud *bang!* from Maxine's room and both girls screamed. It took Billy a couple seconds to realize that they were laughing.

Steve was making his stupid squinty face; Billy still thought he was sexy as hell. "Uh, yeah, okay. Maybe not out here." It still took them a little while to get up, though.

Summer was going good; it was definitely better than the last one had been. Billy guessed over the last couple of weeks he'd kind of fallen into a pattern or a routine or something. That was okay.

He was pretty sure if you'd asked him before this he woulda said he wasn't about that boring shit. But it wasn't that bad or nothing, not when he had shit to do. A routine was okay when it didn't involve going home to get knocked around by your old man or gettin' ran off the road by government agents. So far summer was real good.

The stupid fucking cat wasn't supposed to be a part of the routine but Billy guessed it was starting to be. On Sunday morning he'd left the window above the fire escape open before he'd gone out to play basketball with Harrington and a couple other guys; when he'd come back home the cat had got out and Maxine was making a huge fuss at him. Then it came back five hours later and dropped a dead bird in her lap and she made an even bigger fuss.

The thing was just that Jane seemed to like it a whole lot. Well the whole Creepy Kid Club liked it a lot; Steve liked it a lot because he was a crazy person – but Jane especially liking it made Billy feel some kinda way he guessed. The cat was still his mortal enemy (it left hair all over his bed, two times, and once it tried to stick its head in his cereal bowl) but he felt bad or something. For Jane, not the cat. He'd never got to have a pet growing up or anything either. If he had, his old man probably really woulda chucked it out the window just to spite him. Billy wasn't really gonna do all that.

Anyway Jane was a girl and she was supposed to have a cat or whatever (Max too). It'd calmed down a little over the last week and she and Maxine were always pettin' it on the couch and giggling and shit. They had this whole long list of horrible names they were trying out on it; Billy was pretty sure half of the names were specifically to torture him. It wasn't like he'd gone out and bought it a collar or something. It was Max's cat so it was her problem; he was too busy for that shit.

School had finally let out and for Billy that meant it'd let out for forever, no matter how many times Susan came around nagging him

about classes at the junior college out in Eastgate (three times since the start of July). He'd already went and got his fuckin' diploma for her. Jesus Christ she was about as bad as Maxine was, trying to run his whole goddamn life for him.

Anyway Billy was already going out to Eastgate for his welding class and then he was gonna be done with that too. It didn't even count as a real class 'cause you just had to take one big test at the end of it. Well he was gonna get a fancy certificate and then Hank was gonna pay him more so maybe it was a real class.

The class was on Saturdays and it was okay, wasn't as bad as he'd expected. It was only gonna be the fourth week of it and they'd already got to do a bunch of cool shit last Saturday. Class started at ten, and it was about a forty-minute drive out there, which sucked because it was another day he had to get up early – not as early as when he got up to go to work, though. So far he'd met and talked to two people who didn't piss him off too much yet.

One was an older guy named Rob who knew a lot about cars and machinery and all that already; he was married and had a kid but he was still okay. The other one was a chick named Kasia and she was older too but not as old as Rob. She was twenty-four and queer, well, Billy was pretty sure. Sometimes you couldn't tell if a person was a punk or a queer – he sure as shit hoped you couldn't tell. Maybe he had some kinda radar now or something. Anyway she didn't wear any makeup and she had this crazy hair that was a bunch of different colors. Plus she had that fuckin' triangle on her backpack like he'd told Harrington about. Also there was the fact that she was a chick taking a welding class, but that was some total sexist shit probably; he could hear Maxine hollering at him in his head when he thought that.

Two years ago she'd have been the kinda girl he woulda called a dyke and said a bunch of shit about. Now he just talked to her like normal. He guessed he was curious or something. After class last week they'd got food at this little diner near the college and she'd told Billy about her roommates in Indianapolis. She'd said 'my girlfriend' two times like it was nothing. At first he kinda wondered if she meant *girlfriend* like how Max or Susan or Trace would talk about callin' their girlfriends up on the phone to talk about some book or TV show but

he was pretty sure she meant it in the gay way. So there was that.

This week they went and got food at the same place. It was this shitty little restaurant joint right outside of the junior college campus and it was made up to look like a diner outta the 1950's. Kasia was breakin' Billy's heart and eating a salad with a buncha gross vegetables in it; Billy wasn't eating anything at all.

Susan'd said that his old man was on the road again and that she wanted Max and Steve and Billy over for dinner that night. It was only just past one now but Billy figured he needed to be pretty fucking hungry in order to make himself eat whatever Sue was gonna cook up. It was rude to show up and then not eat at your folks' house. Well she wasn't his folks but whatever.

Anyway Kasia had asked him to hang out for a couple minutes so Billy said sure. They talked about class for a while and what a fuckin' nerd their teacher was, normal stuff. Kasia kinda talked a lot like everybody else. Billy guessed that was what you were supposed to do.

She told him about this big house party she was gonna have in August when her roommate got back from visitin' her family in Maryland. "You should totally come if you want, you can bring someone," she said. She played around with a long strand of her hair; half of it was blue. The other half was shaved and messy and it was this light brown color. Mouse-brown his mom woulda said, somethin' cute like that.

Billy slid a napkin over to her. "What, like my boyfriend?" He almost hadn't even meant to say it and he felt kinda stupid for a second. Steve had said it before, though, a couple times. Boyfriend. It sounded dumb but whatever.

Kasia stared at him. She had these really thin eyebrows that almost disappeared above her eyes; they went way up. "Oh yeah? Do you have a boyfriend?" she asked in delight.

"I guess."

"Nice!" She high-fived him; Billy felt like a nerd. "I wasn't sure if you

were or not.”

“Yeah, I am.” It felt so fucking weird to say it. Nothing exploded or anything and nobody burst out from behind him to try and beat him up for being a faggot, though. “Thought that was why you started talkin' to me.”

She grinned. “No, I just coveted your Megadeth t-shirts,” she told him. She ate some more of her gross salad. “So what's his name?”

“Whose name?” She gave him a look. “Steve.”

“Cute! What's he like?”

Billy didn't know what to say. “He's nice.”

“Oh my god, stop talking so much, I only asked one thing.” She made him laugh. “First boyfriend?”

He really wished he had a buncha food to shove in his mouth; he wasn't gonna take her gross lettuce. “I guess.”

“Figures.” She was still grinning; Billy wasn't sure if he should feel insulted. She leaned over the table and gave him this real annoying look. “So are you guys in love or what?”

“Fuck off,” Billy said.

Kasia laughed at him some more. “Hey, can I give you my address now or are you gonna lose it?”

“Probably lose it, you can write it down though.”

“All right, cool.” She scribbled it down on a napkin that didn't have salad dressing all over it. “I think it's gonna be the first week of August, I'll let you know. I wanna meet *Steve*, okay? Bet he's totally cool.”

That was debatable; Billy didn't say that though. Kasia gave him the napkin and just started talking about class again like it was nothing. That was okay he guessed.

It was way past two by the time he got back to Hawkins. Steve had said he'd come back over and he was already hanging out in the little lobby on the first floor of the apartment. Henderson was with him and they were havin' some big conversation by the steps; they both shut up when they saw Billy.

Steve got his pretty smile on his face right away which was nice or whatever. "Hey man," he said. "How was your class?"

"It was okay." Steve was wearing a real fancy shirt since he was gonna be eatin' over at Sue's place too. Billy wanted Henderson to go away; they had like four hours to kill and he bet he could get Harrington outta that shirt. "What you doing here?" he asked Dustin.

"Uh, nothing! I got lost!" Henderson said, real loud like a weird person. "I'm leaving right now!"

"Good, see ya."

"Okay, no he's not." Steve had one of his dopey expressions on his face, like Dustin was being funny. "Dustin's got something he wants to ask you."

Billy felt suspicious in two seconds. "What?" It better not be some dumb fucking question about gay shit like he'd been asking all week. Steve said that Dustin being curious about them was better than him being a dick about them but Billy didn't see why he needed to know anything about it.

Henderson didn't say anything and Billy rolled his eyes. "Man, I swear to god if this is some of your weirdo bullshit - "

"It totally is, sorry, I'm leaving, I'm going to the arcade right now actually - "

"Dustin," Steve said.

Henderson actually looked nervous which was really fucking weird. The kid never looked nervous - Billy was pretty sure he didn't know how to. "What? I changed my mind, I don't want to do it now."

"Do what?" Billy said.

“Oh, my god, just ask him.” Steve was laughing at them. He was sitting on the steps with his hands in his little shorts pockets and he looked real amused.

“STOP PRESSURING ME, STEVE!” God it was totally gonna be some gay crap or something; Billy didn't know why Harrington seemed to want Billy to throw his little buddy in the street and kill 'im.

“Quit being a baby, he's not that scary.”

“Uh, yes he is!” Henderson said; truly Billy felt touched.

“What you wanna ask me?”

“Nothing!” Dustin looked at Steve and quaked like a scared little kitten.

“Go ahead,” Steve coaxed him.

Henderson let out one of his gross Wookiee sighs; it was almost a gurgle (Billy shuddered). He jammed his hands in his hoodie pocket – Billy didn't know why the hell he was wearin' a goddamn hoodie in the middle of July – and made a weird face, almost like he was in pain. “BILLY,” he said, “WILL YOU TRAIN ME?”

Billy stared blankly. “For what?”

“I told you he'd say no!” Henderson yapped to Steve.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Dustin wants to run track when school starts again, he wants to know if you can help him get in shape.”

“What? Are you serious?” Billy stared blankly some more. He looked at Steve. “Why can't you do it?”

Henderson gave Billy a look that said he was real dumb. “Uh, look at him!”

“Oh, fuck you!” Steve said. He stopped looking like Henderson was amusin' him.

“Come on, you know what I mean!” Dustin turned back to Billy. “My

dad had all these medals and stuff when he was my age, I want to be a long distance runner like he was,” Henderson yapped at him.

Billy gave him a critical once-over; Henderson looked deeply uncomfortable under Billy's gay gaze. “Okay, well, you ain't gonna be a sprinter.”

“Thanks so much, Billy, I'm aware of that! So will you do it or not?”

“I dunno.” Billy sat down on the steps next to Steve. He felt kinda weird about Dustin asking him this or whatever. They'd have to, like. Spend time together. God. It was awful. “I ain't really a great runner or anything.”

“Yeah, but you can still teach me stuff!”

“What, you wanna like work out with me?”

“Sure! I need to be able to run a mile in under twenty minutes by the end of August.”

Billy stared at him. “Wait, you can't even fucking – ”

“Bill!” Steve said warningly.

“I didn't say anything,” Billy told him.

Henderson still had his hands in his hoodie pockets and he still looked weird. “So? Will you do it or not? If I actually make the track team my dad will be, like, really proud of me. He always talks about me doing it.”

Billy didn't answer him for a couple minutes. He'd never actually heard Henderson say anything about his old man before; he'd kinda thought maybe he was dead or something. Maybe he was just a deadbeat. That sucked. Either one sucked. Anyway Billy'd been meaning to start working out again. What with work and class and Harrington and all he'd been gettin' real lazy. He was gonna look like a fucking marshmallow by the end of summer.

“Yeah all right,” he said finally.

“REALLY? YOU’LL DO IT?” Henderson yapped all excited. He even jumped a little; it was horrific.

“I guess. You can go runnin’ with me,” Billy told him. “Meet me on Monday at seven-thirty.”

“Okay, great!” Dustin grinned hugely, then his face fell as the words sunk in. “Wait, do you mean in the morning?”

“Yes in the morning, you fuckin’ toadstool, I gotta work. I ain’t dealing with you at night.” Morning was the best time to go running and all that shit anyway. Maybe Henderson would be way quieter at seven AM too. It was doubtful, but Billy had hope.

“Uh, Billy, it’s summer, that’s really early!” Dustin lisped.

“You wanna go running with me or not?” Billy snapped at him; Henderson looked unsure. “Okay, offer’s expiring in five, four, thr – “

“Okay, okay, okay! No, it’s fine! Okay, this is great, thanks a lot!”

Billy wasn’t sure about how great it was. “All right, go away now,” he commanded. “Stevie and I got grown-up stuff to do.”

“Do we?” Steve asked him real nice.

“Okay! La la la, I don’t need to hear about it! Thanks guys!” Henderson turned and started off; he almost walked right into the big plant in corner of the lobby. “Seven-thirty! I’m gonna bring my radio!”

“Yeah, don’t do that,” Billy said; Steve started laughing at him. Henderson gave him a thumbs up.

Billy’d never really been a morning person but he was starting to like

them a whole lot. In the mornings, he got to have coffee and Steve and Max hangin' around and Max enthusiastically shouting out the wrong answer to *Jeopardy* on the TV every two seconds. Harrington would hog the bathroom to do his hair and then Maxine would hog the bathroom to do *her* hair and somehow Billy'd wind up with no coffee anyway.

On Monday and Tuesday, he left the apartment at quarter-past seven to meet Henderson and left Max and Steve to yap their heads off to each other about hair products. Dustin really *didn't* talk any less in the morning, even when he was huffing and puffing and trying to jog next to Billy at the park. Billy was pretty sure the kid had a glandular problem; he was *really* sweaty.

Wednesday morning Billy woke up to Max blaring Led Zeppelin out in the living room; she'd come over late from work and had probably never went to bed. It seemed pretty early still and the morning light was weak and colorless outside of his window.

Harrington had stayed over again and he was currently hogging the whole bed like a goddamn monster; he had all three blankets kicked around at his feet. Billy looked at him sleepin' for a couple seconds because he could, then rolled over onto his side to try and check his alarm clock. Wasn't even past six yet.

"Mm. Bill." Steve was a light sleeper, also a clingy bitch. He flopped over and threw an arm around Billy's waist, then shifted closer to him on the mattress.

"You awake?"

"Hhhhdunno," Steve said like a sexy monster. He yawned real loud in Billy's ear; he had gross morning breath. Billy was pretty sure he smelled like a whole goddamn ashtray though so it was okay. Steve's thumb swiped over his hip a couple times, felt nice. "Mm. I had a dream about you."

Billy ran a hand up Steve's arm, a little awkwardly since he was being kinda smushed. He'd thought maybe he could get back to sleep for a while but now he guessed not. "Oh yeah? What kinda dream you have about me?"

Steve yawned again. "I don't remember. Had to ... had to eat dinner at Dustin's mom's house."

"Sounds like a nightmare."

Steve laughed a little. His voice sounded heavy and slow, really sleepy. He rubbed his face against the back of Billy's neck and curled around him some more. "Why's the damn radio playin'?" he mumbled.

Fuck but Steve was really hard; he had a major-hard on. It was the morning after all. Billy could feel the length of him against his ass, pressed up against the small of his back. It was kinda turning him on. Okay it was turning him on a lot. "Think uh. Think Max's got my record player on."

"Mm. Oh. Does that mean I have to get up soon?"

Billy arched his back a little. "Pretty sure you're already up."

Steve just mumbled something and shifted even closer to him, wrapping his arms around him even tighter. He started kissing Billy's neck in this soft way; when he pressed his mouth against a spot below Billy's ear, it made his whole body buzz like an electric shock and he had to try not to shake. He felt too cold and too hot where Steve's skin was touching his. He could feel about everything of Steve's pressing against him. "Shit."

"Yeah? Okay." Steve kissed him some more and Billy pushed back against him again. Steve's hand tightened on his hip. "God." He started rubbing his dick against Billy's ass, kind of slow.

It felt really fucking good. He wanted to do more – wanted to roll over and kiss Steve or something but that was way too much work for right now. Anyway it felt *really* fucking good so he just kept pushing back against him. It was the morning and he was tired and turned on and everything was moving real slow. Steve mumbled his name into the back of his neck.

Billy felt real hot in about two seconds with Harrington rubbing on him and saying his name all low and shit. He didn't really wanna

speed up or anything though; he didn't wanna to spoil it. They were both just in their boxers and he could feel everything – their bodies together, the mattress underneath them. He could feel Steve's prick against his ass and pressing against him and it felt really fucking good. He felt a little dizzy and he really didn't want it to stop.

They'd messed around a ton of times of course. They'd made out and humped each other like morons and rubbed off on each other but not really like this. This was kinda new or whatever, Steve's dick against his ass. It was definitely new. Somehow they'd just never done that before.

Billy knew that guys could, like, fuck and he knew that they could fuck like *this* (okay without the boxers) but he and Steve definitely hadn't done any shit like that yet. He didn't know if Steve wanted to do it or whatever. Harrington had said before that he liked guys and girls; he'd said that a couple times, like he was trying to reassure Billy or something. That was cool and all but Billy didn't know if Steve was into that really gay shit or if he wanted to be. If he actually wanted to fuck guys or if he wanted to fuck Billy or something. Maybe he'd think it was too dirty or something, or he might just not be into it. It wouldn't be like being with a girl, at least Billy was pretty sure.

Honestly if you wanted the truth, Billy barely knew how that all kinda stuff worked, with two guys anyway. How could he know? He'd never let himself think about it too much before; he'd never really let himself think about Steve like this before. It'd felt wrong to think about him that way when they'd only been friends, and now they just never really messed around like that.

Everything else they'd done so far had been great and Billy was fine with that. He was good with what they'd been doing and he didn't wanna, like, fuck it up by trying to bring up – shit he didn't know. He didn't even know what he wanted really. Steve to fuck him or something. Or if he wanted Billy to do it to him.

It didn't really matter if they did that stuff or not. The thing was that, so far, Billy was pretty sure he hadn't been exactly shy about what-all he wanted to do with Harrington. But this kinda shit was different; he didn't know anything about it. It made him feel like real nervous or somethin'. Steve'd said before that he'd thought that Billy was

supposed to be the cool guy but Billy wasn't the cool guy. He was kinda like a gay disaster, in fact. He didn't fucking know how to do that shit.

It just made him real nervous. Like what if he brought it up and Steve wasn't into it. That would be okay if he wasn't but then it'd be like this thing between them. Maybe he'd think Billy was some kind of dirty freak, or like a queen or something. At least then Billy'd know how he felt, he guessed.

Anyway he didn't feel nervous now. What they were doing right now felt really good and he didn't feel freaked out or worried about it. Fuck it felt really good; he guessed Steve was pretty into it. Steve had his arms around him and they were really close and Billy could feel him. He was rubbing his dick against the cleft of Billy's ass and it felt fucking great and Billy wanted it. He could see how maybe people liked this or would want to do it like this.

Billy guessed that he wanted to, like. Fuck. He guessed he wanted to take it or whatever. If Steve wanted to fuck him then Billy would take it; really he'd do whatever the fuck Steve wanted to do to him. He really wanted it already and it'd been like ten minutes and they were barely even doing anything. It just felt really good; Steve bein' on him felt really good.

Steve kept on kissing his neck and rubbing on him and Billy kept on pushing back against him. Shit. It made him totally hot. He was pretty sure he was making these embarrassing little gasping noises every time Steve moved against him. Steve curled his leg over Billy's and pressed against him a little harder and oh god okay that was a new angle; he was feeling a lot of things. Billy breathed out hard and reached around behind himself to tangle a hand in Steve's hair. Steve started kissing his bicep which was really dumb but also felt great.

Steve was mumbling in his ear like they was in some romance movie or something; if Billy wasn't so turned on he'd probably fuckin' laugh at him. "That's good." Steve pressed against him again. "Oh, damn," he muttered like a little nerd and then Billy did start laughing.

"Shut the fuck up, man."

Steve pulled him even tighter towards himself and rested his chin against the crook of Billy's shoulder; Billy didn't see how they could get any closer without takin' the rest of their clothes off. He could feel Steve smiling against his neck. "Jesus, can you stop? Quit making fun of me."

"Can't," Billy managed.

Steve kissed his neck some more and worked a hand down the front of Billy's underwear; Billy bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. "God. You feel so good."

"Mmmhahahaha," Billy said like a nerd with Steve's hand around his cock. They were spooned together at a really weird angle with Billy kind of twisted around so he could keep his hand in Steve's hair.

Steve kept on kissing Billy's arm and kissing his neck and jerking him off real slow; he bit down lightly against Billy's ear. Fuck he was really good. "Arm okay?" he muttered.

"Uh-huh." His arm was great. He tightened his hand in Steve's hair. He could feel everything; he could feel Steve's chest pressed against his back; he could feel Steve's amazing hand on his dick. He could feel the head of Steve's own dick through his boxers. He was really hard and he was huge and it made Billy feel kind of crazy; he was gonna bust his load in about a minute and feel totally dumb.

Jesus Christ Harrington could totally wreck him. If they really did it or something it would probably hurt because he was so fucking huge. It had to hurt, right, doing something like that. Billy couldn't see how it couldn't hurt or whatever and god he really shouldn't be turned on by that. There was something wrong with him, holy shit. He was used to things hurtin' anyway; it might be okay. But that didn't matter because it felt so fucking good right now. God he wanted it. He didn't even know how but he wanted it.

Steve was still kind of humping him like they were fourteen-year-olds and muttering his name and saying all his romantic shit like *Oh Billy* and *Yeah like that* and *You feel so good*. He made Billy feel all romantic and shit. Then he sat up a little and said, "Uh, Bill?" in a more normal voice.

Billy opened one eye; he felt less romantic right away. He wondered if Steve was going to finally have his gay panic or something over humping Billy's asshole for ten minutes. "What, what."

Steve shifted over and sat up a little. His hand was definitely not on Billy's dick anymore, nor was his dick against Billy's ass. That was dumb. "Um. Your cat's starin' at us."

"What?" Billy sat up too and looked around. The cat was sitting on the little radiator below the windowsill and it was really staring at them with its one good eye. "HEY, SHITHEAD." The cat's tail twitched like she was making fun of him.

"Okay, geez, too loud." Steve was laughing at him. "Was she in here all night?"

"Dunno, I guess so." Billy was too horny for this shit. He stretched over and almost fell off the bed, then found a sneaker on the floor and lobbed it at the cat's head. It jumped like it'd been burned and dashed under the bed with a loud unhappy yowl. "Better?" he asked Steve. He was totally capable of normal sentences right now. "Or you want me to chase her out?"

"No, I'm good. Sorry. Sorry, it freaks me out." Billy turned to look at him and Steve kissed him right away like Billy wanted him to. That was great and all but he didn't know if he should say *Okay, keep grinding on my ass now*. God he still wanted it.

Steve flopped back down on the bed and started tugging Billy over him; Billy climbed over his hips and straddled him. "Yeah, fuck, get on top of me," Steve said like a porn star. He was so bossy. He put a hand back down Billy's boxers. With his other hand he held onto Billy's hip and pushed up against him.

Okay that was another new angle. "Ah fuck," Billy said; he almost fell over. Out in the living room, Led Zeppelin was playing 'Good Times Bad Times' on the record player. He ended up bein' really late to meet Henderson.

A couple days passed by and finally it was Friday again which meant it was almost the weekend. The weekend meant Steve and class and gettin' to see Rob and Kasia and then more Steve and probably a lot of junk-food.

Saturday after class Billy was gonna go and see *Hellraiser* with Byers; Will had called him up all nervous the other night like he was askin' Billy out on a date or something ("Okay, but he knows it's not really a date, right?" Harrington had asked all loud like a jealous moron, as if he didn't own Billy's whole ass).

Anyway Billy was real jazzed up for it; he'd been waiting for *Hellraiser* for about an entire goddamn year. Harrington said he'd come over afterwards and they could do their thing. Whatever their thing was, probably the sex thing. Billy was so excited for the sex thing. He'd probably get the sex thing tonight too since it was Friday and Friday was a Steve-day too. Friday was great.

Maxine came boarding into the shop at a little past four and Billy didn't even feel too annoyed by her. He was kinda grateful to see her, actually, even though she was wearin' a real short dress and looked like a horror.

Every other day he and Hank traded off on the radio station. This Friday was Hank's day and he was playing THE POINT 96.5 which was a bunch of sixties and seventies music. That was fine and all but they seemed to have a rotation of about fourteen whole songs that they just played over and over. if Billy heard fuckin' 'Fox on the Run' or another Creedence song one more goddamn time, he was gonna go and lay himself down in the street, and he *liked* CCR.

Max was in some kinda mood though and Billy felt less grateful pretty quick. She spent about ten minutes bitchin' her head off over some stupid fuckin' pool party that Sinclair'd gotten invited to and she hadn't; this was a real big great offense apparently. Then Hank came up from the back and she spent ten more minutes telling him the same sad tale.

"Sounds like you better watch your guy, kiddo," Hank told her. He sounded like she was real funny.

"Bet it's Melanie's party," Billy said; Max scowled her head off at him. Ha ha! Knew it. "Don't worry 'bout it, go swimming in Harrington's pool."

"What, with Dustin?" Max made her fishface.

Hank told Billy that he could leave a couple minutes early; Billy guessed that was okay since he wasn't doing shit anyway. He got his first full-time paycheck and Max bounded along after him so's he could stop at the bank. Then she started bitching her head off anew about how they needed groceries and cat food so Billy told her they could go out. Back to the apartment they went so he could get his car and they went off to the supermarket just outside of town.

Mind you Billy felt like a fuckin' nerd getting squawked at by his goddamn little sister in the market but it wasn't like he could just never buy food or nothin'. Back in Riverside he'd worked at a grocery store for a couple months and Max and Tracey had always been in bugging him. He guessed it made him think of that or something.

Max was still griping and grouching over her pool party drama; she looked real mournful as she hefted a big bag of Friskies into her shopping cart (Billy glared at the cat's face on the logo). "I knew something stupid like this would happen! Everyone knows I'm going out of town next week. Melanie has been hitting on Lucas, like, *all year*. It's *not funny* anymore!"

"He don't like her like that."

Maxine scrunched her face up instead of looking reassured. "Oh, what, do you guys talk about me?"

"No," Billy lied. What else were they supposed to talk about.

Max pushed the shopping cart away from him in a dramatic way. "Well, we kind of got into a fight, he's definitely going to her stupid party *now*."

Billy didn't really know what to say about it all to her; he barely even

remembered bein' fifteen. He'd had Tracey for forever and he'd never really had to worry about that dumb shit with her. Not like he didn't get jealous but he'd never had to worry. Maybe it was different for girls. "So just tell 'im not to go."

Max gave him a look that said he was a total moron. "I can't talk to you about this, you're the *enemy*! I need Bev!" she said all mournful. "She doesn't come back from Maine until *August*." She slumped over the shopping cart and pushed herself into the produce section and then looked around, distracted by the thought of spending Billy's fucking money. "Should we get vegetables?"

"They're only good on pizza."

"Okay." She looked like he was real funny for some reason. "Oh! Cereal!" She took off again. "Do you think El needs more waffles?"

Billy paid for all their shit and then they loaded up the food into his smashed-up car. Maxine tore into a pack of popsicles right away like a little savage and sat in the front seat slurping away at one (grape, which was the worst flavor).

"Don't get that shit on my seat." He started up the Camaro.

Max ignored him being threatening. "When are you going to fix your car? You still have dried blood everywhere."

It was such a nice reminder. Anyway, it wasn't everywhere, and anyway, some of it was still Harrington's back from his little joyride with all the kids and the monsters. That was a nice reminder too. Okay he probably really did need new seats.

"Runs, don't it?"

She made a face. "I guess. You always cared about your car before." Billy didn't answer her so she rolled her eyes and put the radio on; he was tortured listenin' to the new George Michael song all the way back down Main Street.

Max leaned over him to wave at some asshole down the street and dribbled her popsicle on his arm. Billy smacked at her. "Shithead, are you serious?"

“Oh! Sorry! Your shirt’s dirty anyway, do you even know how to do laundry? Some people use this thing called soap too,” Max said, tearing into him in two seconds like he hadn’t just bought her a buncha food.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” Billy asked her anyway; she made a stupid face at him and then laughed. At least she wasn’t wailin’ her head off about Sinclair no more. “Put your fuckin’ seatbelt on, okay?”

“Okay, okay!” Max put her seatbelt on but continued to lean up in her seat. “Hey, Steve’s car is at Hathaway’s!” she said. “I guess he’s eating his first dinner or something.” She made Billy laugh. “He’s coming over later, right?”

“I guess.” Billy stopped at the red light at Main and Redwood, right in front of the diner.

“Okay, should we go in and say hi?” she asked. Then she said, “Oh,” in a weird voice.

“What?” He looked over too. It was only just past five o’clock and the joint was pretty empty. He could see Harrington inside at the big window; he was sitting up in one of the booths in the front instead of back at their usual spot in the far corner. He was talking and laughing with Nancy Wheeler who was seated across from him and grinning right back at him. *Oh*, Billy said in his head too like a great big moron.

It was real stupid how mad he felt in about a minute. It didn’t mean anything but it was real stupid. It was real interesting too because Steve’d just talked about Nancy the other day and he’d said how they hadn’t even been talking to each other. Steve always had a lot of stuff to say Billy guessed. Right now they looked like they were having a great conversation and all.

It was just real interesting; Billy stared at them from his car like a goddamn idiot. He and Steve had been – they’d just been doing so much shit together lately and Billy guessed he’d been letting himself get pretty dumb again. He’d actually kind of forgotten that Nancy existed or whatever.

Obviously she did. Obviously Harrington was just thrilled as hell to be talking to her; he was so fucking stupid about Nancy Wheeler even after all the shit he'd told Billy about her. Steve probably didn't even realize all he'd told him.

It just made Billy feel like a fucking moron – was like this sinking feeling or something. He knew exactly what the fuck Nancy thought about Steve too. It was stupid to have forgotten about her.

Through the window, Henderson was walking over to the table and slurping on a huge soda. He said something down to Steve and then grinned at the reponse he got, which was a smack in the arm. Then he looked up and saw Max and Billy across the street starin' at them all; they probably looked like a pair of total freakshows. From out in the car they were only about thirty feet away but it felt real far.

Dustin's face fell and he put his soda down. He said something else and pointed, then Steve and Nancy looked up too. Everyone stared at each other like in a movie or something and Steve stopped smiling when he saw them. It was really great.

All of this took about a grand total of maybe twenty seconds; it felt like longer though. Then the light turned green so Billy pushed down on the gas, maybe a little too hard, and drove off towards home. He turned the radio up some more. It was totally fucking stupid.

Max kept on looking at him like she was expecting him to totally flip his shit or something; she was about eight inches from his face like a goddamn nutcase. "Quit starin' at me," Billy told her.

"I'm not!" Max yapped, very obviously fucking staring at him. She did shift in her seat and move a normal distance away from him, though.

After another minute she reached over and turned the radio down again. Her hand stayed on the volume knob for a moment and her little brows knitted together, lookin' at him. "They were just ... eating together," she said slowly. "It was probably nothing."

"Yeah," Billy said. Jesus God he didn't need her to go into some big thing about it, tryin' to reassure him or whatever like he was her giant baby. Actually she almost sounded like she was reassuring

herself which was totally fuckin' stupid. It didn't even matter. He just wanted to get to his place and get out of his goddamn car.

"It doesn't mean anything. Steve's just totally stupid!"

That was kinda the problem. Okay he wasn't really stupid but that was kinda the problem. "Yep."

Max chewed on her bottom lip, looking at him. "Are you okay?" she asked; Billy didn't answer her. "Billy?"

"Doesn't matter."

"But do you —" Billy turned the radio up on her.

Max flopped back in her seat and frowned down at the dashboard. "Guess not," she mumbled.

11. Chapter Eleven

Chapter Eleven

It was one PM on Friday, and Steve had a massive headache.

He'd stayed late over at Bill's place last night, til past midnight (Max and Billy got pretty scary at Monopoly, especially Max), and had fallen asleep with his contacts in after he'd gone home. He really needed to stop doing that – the contacts thing, not staying late at Bill's. That'd started the headache when he woke up and by the afternoon it was pretty bad, a low throbbing behind his eyes.

He wondered if he was actually making his eyesight worse somehow. He blinked down hard at his paperwork; the letters swam back and forth in front of his eyes and then blurred. Maybe he should start wearing his glasses all the time. He hadn't done that since he was a kid – he'd begged his mom for contacts when he'd turned 13 and had never gone back.

Bill had said before that Steve looked hot with his glasses on, but he was probably teasing him or whatever (sometimes it took Steve a while to figure out if Bill was teasing him or not). He didn't look hot; he looked like an owl. Glasses were for brainy people and Steve was only brainy about, like, hockey stats.

Anyway it wasn't hockey season. Steve's dad had been in the office all morning, too, which meant Steve was being super serious about his paperwork and his filing and he wasn't even thinkin' about Bill at all (well, that much). Pretty much everyone was on edge with Steve's dad here at work, Steve included. Whenever Dad showed up at work he didn't talk to Steve too much – just enough to remind everyone that he was Steve's old man. That was annoying.

Dad had been up front with Linda since past eleven, bugging her about transfer paperwork for some new hire over at the big

warehouse out in Gainsborough. The whole office could hear him going on and on. Finally at one Steve bit the bullet and went up front to the little lobby to save her.

“Hey, Linda, I lost, uh, *all* my order forms somehow, really crazy, can you print me out a couple copies, please?” Steve leaned his elbows on her desk and raised his eyebrows at her. “Sorry to interrupt, I really need 'em.”

Dad clapped him on the back (that was annoying too). “Steve, you kidding? You'd lose your goddamn head if it wasn't attached to your neck.”

That was the most annoying. Steve thought he was a lot of things but he didn't think he was that scatterbrained or whatever. Since he was at his place of business and Dad was kinda his boss (technically he thought Linda was his boss, but Dad was *her* boss, which totally made him Steve's boss too) he managed not to say anything smart back. “Yeah, thanks.”

Dad laughed like Steve'd said something really hilarious. Even his laugh today was irritating. “Don't let him make you babysit him,” he told Linda.

Steve made a horrible face and Linda covered her mouth with a hand so that Dad wouldn't see her smile. She leaned on the desk too and raised her eyebrows back at him. “I don't babysit anyone, my kids are grown,” she said flatly. “Steve, honey, you gotta fix the printer for me first, I jammed it again.”

“Yeah, where's your keys at?” She handed them over.

Steve unlocked the printer (a huge monster-sized machine in the corner of the room) and Dad finally gave up on harassing Linda and making his stupid comments. He went on into the back office to do another walkthrough. Linda made a face too once he was gone. “Asshole,” she muttered.

“Why's he need you to pull up paperwork out here?” Steve asked her. Somehow he'd gotten ink on his shirt again in two seconds. Oh well.

Linda scoffed and flopped back in her desk chair. The chair had wheels and she spun around like a kid to face him; her jewelry rattled. "They don't understand the new system at the other building, baby." She stretched forward exaggeratedly and squinted at the open door leading into the back office. "What is he *doing*?" she stage-whispered. "He's going to make Joanne cry again."

"We sent her out to get more coffee. She went through the maintenance hallway, don't worry."

"Oh, smart." She nodded sagely. "Did you tell her to get me a –"

"Yeah, I got you," Steve interrupted her. Linda only drank these fancy decaf drinks with eighty flavors in them.

Linda beamed at him. "You're the best part of my day, honey."

Maybe when he had coffee or whatever, Steve didn't say. It was nice to hear it anyway.

Linda flopped back in her chair again and Steve could tell she was about to go off complaining. "Wants me to do all his HR work, why didn't he move me out to Gainsborough three years ago? That's only twenty minutes from my house, you know. I guess he needed *Marisol* in the office so badly."

Steve didn't say anything about Marisol; she was something (someone, whatever) that he really didn't feel like talking about with Linda. Or with anyone really. Marisol had been Dad's secretary out here before he'd opened up the other two offices; Steve had never really met her. Dad had been banging her for a couple years but Linda didn't really need to know about it. Even Steve's own mom never talked about it.

He was pretty sure everyone in the company already knew anyway, or at least talked about it. It was kind of obvious with the way Dad was always bringin' her on his business trips and everything. It was pretty embarrassing. "I'm glad you didn't go out to Gainsborough," was all he said.

Linda clicked her tongue at him. "Stevie, you're my sweetheart."

"Thank you, I know." He was almost done with the printer.

Linda kept on looking at him; now she was making one of her annoying faces. "How's your special somebody doin' this week?"

Jesus H. Steve stared at the printer like a moron. "Great, but, uh, I'm not talking about them with my dad twelve feet away."

"Okay, okay. Okay, you're right." She swirled back around in her chair and busied herself with her transfer papers.

Dad finally left right after Joanne got back with her coffees; she looked like a scared mouse while Steve's dad cornered her to remind her about the dress code for the business meetings next week. It was a Friday so she was wearing slacks; Steve didn't see the big deal.

Mostly everyone else left around three but Steve stayed behind to help Linda clean up the front for the weekend. Todd and Craig were high-fiving each other because Craig was going out to Chicago too and he'd been trying to score with Joanne all year. He'd been talking about making his move for two weeks, very loudly, whenever Joanne wasn't around.

Joanne glared after them as they went out the front door to the parking lot; she was sitting on Linda's desk with her coffee. She kinda looked like a little kid and it made Steve smile. "I know they're talking about me," she said darkly. "Steve, you're still coming next week, right?"

"Yeah, you guys can babysit me," Steve said. He locked up the back office and gave Linda back her keyring.

"Hmm." Joanne twisted her neck to look back at him. "Was your dad saying crappy stuff to you again?"

"Always is," Linda said. She gave Steve a coffee too.

"He's not that bad."

"He was going off all morning." Linda started up with her gossip.

Joanne frowned a little and set her coffee down, dangerously close to

Linda's important transfer papers. She was tall and had that kinda too-skinny look like Nancy had, big brown eyes and red hair that fell halfway down her back. She kinda reminded him of a sixties movie star or a hippie or something. Not exactly super-beautiful or all that, but she had this face that made you want to talk to her, like she was real sweet or something. Steve thought she was pretty cute. He guessed he could see why Craig had been trying to score with her all year even though she was like 30 and had that anxiety thing (Steve definitely understood about the anxiety thing). "God, is he like that at home too?" she asked him.

"Used to be, he doesn't stay at home anymore," Steve blurted out and then felt like a moron right away. He'd been too busy thinkin' his thoughts and not thinkin' about what was coming out of his mouth. Linda was the best, and Joanne was cool and all, but they didn't need to know about his crappy dad.

The girls stared at him and he felt even dumber; it was not helping his headache. "Steve, you never told me that!" Linda said.

"Uh, yeah, it's not really my favorite topic."

Steve's parents were too – weird or whatever and they made *him* feel weird about it. How they were. Dad had had a separate apartment for maybe four or five years now, but he and Mom still weren't divorced or anything. They weren't even saying to anybody that they'd split up (aside from Aunt Mary, Steve guessed) and they barely even talked to Steve about it. They just talked shit about each other all the time, then put on fake smiles at Christmas and stuff for both their families. It was so fake.

Steve didn't really understand it. His mom made enough money – she could leave his dad if she wanted to. She *should* leave him, really. Well she'd had plenty to say the couple times Steve'd tried to bring it up with her. He didn't feel like thinking about that either.

The girls were still looking at him; Steve guessed they wanted him to say more stuff. "Yeah, my dad's not really the most – " he said and then decided he didn't want to say more stuff. "You can't say anything."

“What, me?” Linda said innocently. Steve gave her a look. “Steve, I would never. You know, the way he talks, he’s a real – “

“Yeah, he talks a lot.”

“Some family man,” huffed Linda. “Well, I will say, I always knew that he never really – “

“Lin,” Joanne said, not loudly. Steve guessed she felt bad for him or something. She finally stood up from where she’d been perched on the edge of the desk and ran a hand through her long hair, smoothing it down. She handed Linda the papers she’d been half-sitting on.

She looked over at Steve. “Hey, forget about your dad, we’re going to have so much fun in Chicago!” she said brightly. “I went last year too, we’re only at the meetings for like two hours a day. You can drink with me at the hotel bar.”

“Yeah, you can keep her away from Craig,” Linda put in; Joanna made a terrible face.

“As if.” Her eyes slid over to Steve. “Steve, you know, if you were about five years older – “

“Oh, right, Jo, if he was twenty-four?” Linda said. “That’s really lovely.”

“I’m just sayin’!” Huh. “I’m not that old, you know,” Joanne told Linda all grumpy. “I can show a guy a thing or two – “

Linda ignored her. “Steve’s got a girlfriend anyway,” she said, blabbing Steve’s kinda-fake business. “You better stop, that’s harassment.”

“What, no, no, let her finish,” Steve said; the girls laughed like he’d wanted them to.

Joanne looked kinda embarrassed or something though. “I’m sorry, Steve,” she said. “I was only joking. Half-joking,” she added thoughtfully; Linda swatted her. “All right!”

“Yeah, that’s okay,” Steve told her. “I don’t really talk about them

here.”

“I’ll say, I didn’t know you started goin’ out with somebody! We never get any details.”

“I do,” Linda said right away. Jesus H.

“Uh, it’s not really – “

“He’s datin’ a pretty blonde, they been together a while,” Lin butted in happily.

Well it wasn’t exactly untrue. Steve needed her to stop talking, though – she thought she was too hilarious. “Thanks, Linda.”

She was laughing at him. “Take your coffee, sweetheart. See you on Monday.”

“Okay. Bye guys. See you Monday.” It was definitely time to go home; Steve escaped with his coffee.

Traffic was the worst and it took forever to get back to Hawkins; Steve inched the car down the highway and felt annoyed about his dad. By the time he made it home it was a little past four-thirty – he might as well have just worked the full day. It felt good to get home and get inside the house though. It’d been so hot all week. Even though the sun was out, it looked like it was going to start pouring rain at any second.

Luke and Leia weren’t outside anymore which meant his mom had been here during the day. When he got inside the front hallway, the TV was blaring away in the living room and only Luke came loping out into the hallway to greet him. “Hey, hey, what ya doing?”

“Steve, is that you?” someone called out; it was Dustin.

Steve felt glad he hadn’t used a baby voice for once (dogs and babies

loved that crap). He cleared his throat anyway. "Who else would it be?"

"I don't know, uh. Billy with a rose in his mouth." Dustin couldn't even finish his sentence without cracking up. He was so hilarious too, it was unbelievable.

Anyway. "He's at work, asshole." Steve decided not to tell Dust that he was totally the one who gave the flowers and not Bill. He patted Luke for a couple seconds and wandered off into the living room; Luke trotted loyally after him.

Steve's head still hurt pretty bad and he was deciding whether or not to be super annoyed: it would depend on how many stupid kids were over. "What are you doing here, did you find my spare key again?"

It was just Dust crashed out on the couch and not the whole pack of brats. "No, your mom let me in! You don't have any good snacks here anymore."

"That's great, what did you do, hang out with my mom?" The thought of Dustin alone with his mom made him feel kind of nervous for a couple obvious reasons. Dust had an even bigger mouth than Steve did, and apparently he'd already been tellin' his mom all kinds of gay crap. Mrs. Henderson might believe a couple of code-names but Steve's mom probably wouldn't.

"Not really, just for like five minutes."

"Okay, what did you say to her, did you –"

"Oh, my god, buddy, relax!" Dust told him. "I'm not going to talk about you and Billy to your mom, do you think I'm stupid?" Steve pointedly didn't say anything so Dust flipped him off; he was really sweet. "She was doing paperwork anyway. I told her I needed air-conditioning, Billy made me run *two miles* this morning! Well, I mean, kind of run. I tried really hard."

Two miles was pretty good. Dustin had only been going jogging with Bill for like a week and Steve had expected them both to be way grumpier about it. He sat down on the couch and let Luke lick his

arm. "Did you throw up again?"

"Not today!"

"Nice, man." Steve high-fived him and Dust grinned. "Were you hangin' here all day?"

"Just for like an hour, I thought you'd be home already. Your mom says to tell you she has some editor's party tonight, she is bringing you some wine back."

Steve guessed that meant his mom wanted to hang around with him later. He was so cool. "Okay."

"Hey, I wanted to know if I could look at your old yearbooks, do you still have them?" Dust asked him abruptly.

Steve felt suspicious right away. "Why?"

"Funny you should ask, because I knew you would ask," Dust said like a weird person. "I did not purchase one this year, I wanted to look at them and see if the quality is really worth twenty-five dollars."

"Uh, I guess they're okay. I dunno where they're at, probably under eighty piles of crap in the basement," Steve told him. "I'll get 'em for you next week or something."

"Can't I just borrow them now?"

He was so weird; Steve wondered what kinda creepy thing he was up to. "Okay, you don't even order them 'til like January," he pointed out. "I'll get you one later."

"Fine." Dust stared at the TV all moody, then glanced over again. "Hey, you didn't do basketball last year, right? Just swim team?"

"Uh, yeah. Why?" Steve felt even more suspicious.

"What were your stats?"

Steve stared at him. "Why?" he asked again.

"I'm just curious." Steve stared at him some more and Dust made a face. "Oh, my god, Steve, I can't ask a question?"

"I don't remember, it was like over a year ago."

Dust sighed heavily. "Fine, great." He bounced the remote on his knee.

Steve ignored him being a total weirdo. "What ya watchin'?"

Dustin was watching a rerun of that old show *The Outer Limits*; Steve sat with him for a while and then Dust started groaning and moaning that he was hungry. He usually got really crabby right around four o'clock, like a little baby or a puppy. Dust said that he was going to the arcade with Max and Will later and that they'd probably be at Billy's place, so Steve said they could go get food and head over.

He really wanted to go to Bill's place and he kind of wanted Dustin to go away. That was shitty but he really wanted to see Billy — it was Friday and he'd been waiting all day.

But they could go and get food first. Dust said he wanted fries and he wanted to go to Hathaway's; they went out to Steve's car as Steve thought up ways to make Dust go away.

"It's gonna be so boring with you and Max gone next week, summer totally blows so far." Dust was wailing and complaining as they walked slowly down the driveway.

"I think you'll survive, I'm only gonna be gone for like three days," Steve reminded him.

"Yeah, Friday AND Saturday! What the hell am I supposed to do?"

Okay Steve was being a total dick for wanting Dust to go away. Dustin was just joking about him being gone, but it made Steve feel kind of good anyway. Well, good and bad at the same time. It was nice when people wanted to hang out with you and wailed that they had nothin' else to do. He'd have to start trying to do more stuff with Dust again, maybe without Bill around all the time. "Okay, what about Becca, what's she been up to?"

"I don't know." Dustin instantly looked all down instead of lovesick like he usually did; he and Rebecca were way too gross about each other. "She's always babysitting now, her mom got a new job at night. And we got into a fight anyway."

"Really? When?"

"I don't know," Dust said again. "Tuesday maybe, after you kicked me out of Billy's."

"We didn't make you leave." They'd been watching *The Terminator*; Bill had stole it from the video store.

"You guys looked like you were going to make out or something," Dust pointed out.

"So what? Too scary?" Steve asked him.

Dust gave him an annoying look. "I don't know, I just thought I'd give you your privacy."

Steve ignored him; he was deciding whether or not to feel irritated again. The kids got pretty fucking annoying when they were all at Billy's place — they were always making jokes about him and Bill hooking up or whatever. Not always but sometimes, pretty often. He couldn't even sit on the couch next to Bill without someone sayin' something stupid.

It was because they were kids, Steve guessed, but there was more to it too. It made Steve feel majorly weird. If Billy was a girl, Dust wouldn't need to make some big deal over it, runnin' out of the apartment so Steve could kiss Bill or whatever. If he and Billy were, like, a normal couple, they could do whatever at his place, and nobody would say any dumb crap. It didn't feel fair.

He and Bill didn't even do shit in front of anybody. Like they didn't even kiss or whatever if somebody was over, except for that one time in the morning when Billy had kissed him goodbye. That'd only been Max there, anyway. Okay, *and* she'd walked in on them once (embarrassing) but Bill was getting a lot better at locking the front door. They still definitely hooked up every night that Steve stayed

over but they always had to wait to be alone.

Mostly he didn't mind it but sometimes he minded it. It felt different than gettin' teased about a girl – he and Bill already had to be so careful all the time. They should be able to do whatever at his place.

Maybe Steve was supposed to be grateful that he had a couple of friends who didn't care that he was with a guy or whatever. It was still annoying though. They didn't need to all crowd over at Bill's apartment if they didn't wanna see any – gay activity or whatever. Steve wondered if he should get, like, a sign or something.

He wondered what Dust would do if Steve ever actually kissed Bill in front of him; maybe his frizzy little head would explode or something. Or more likely he'd probably say something totally dumb and then Bill would really actually murder him. Then he and Steve would probably get into a fight over it because even though Dust was annoying as hell Steve still didn't want Bill to kick the crap out of him. He didn't know if —

“Uh, Steve? Hello? Are you going to unlock the car?”

“Oh. Right.” Steve got his keys out of his pocket and opened up the car doors. He tried to remember what they'd even been talkin' about. “You didn't tell me you and Becca got into it, what're you guys fighting about?”

Dust was already adjusting the air vents with a glum look on his face. “I don't know,” he muttered in a weird voice. “I don't remember.”

Steve sat in the driver's seat and stared at him. He'd only been inside for less than a half hour but it was already hot as hell in the car. “Uh, okay, what does that mean, you don't remember?”

“I don't know,” Dust said again. He smacked at the AC vent above the radio. “I don't remem – I guess I must of said something, she's mad at me now! She's probably on her stupid period or something.”

“Yeah, well, what did you said to her?” Dust said stuff a lot without thinking and that could be crummy, but one of the things that Steve liked about him was how much he cared about his friends or

whatever. Rebecca was Dustin's girlfriend so that meant he cared a lot.

"I don't know, why are you asking me so much crap?" Steve smacked at him and pulled his baseball cap down over his eyes. "STEVE!"

"Don't fuckin' yell at me while I'm driving you around, shithead."

"Uh, you're not driving yet!" Dust pointed out. He scowled and adjusted his dumb hat. "I'm not even yelling, I don't know what I said! It doesn't matter." He changed the subject in two seconds. "Hey, do you think Billy will let me in his apartment without you to watch the Michael Jackson special on Friday night?"

"Yeah, doubt it," Steve told him, twisting the steering wheel to pull out of the driveway. "What the hell is that, anyway?"

Dust stared at him like he was a moron. "Steve, they're releasing the first single from *Bad*, do you not watch TV anymore?"

"Jesus. I don't know if you realize, I've been kind of busy lately." He had, like, a job and stuff, and a hot boyfriend to take out (discreetly). And hook up with (again, discreetly). And play video games with. And hook up with. Who had time for MTV?

"Sure. Busy." Dust started grinning like an asshole so Steve turned the radio up before he could start saying his horrible annoying shit about Bill's sexual prowess again or something. Anyway Steve had prowess too. He was pretty sure he knew what that word meant.

It was still pretty early so the diner wasn't too crowded yet for a Friday afternoon. Dust shuffled down the sidewalk ahead of him yammering that he wanted a milkshake and that he wanted to sit at the counter. Steve put his hands in his pockets and followed him. He guessed he could eat. The sun was too bright and his head really hurt; he decided he was going to put the blame on Dad for talkin' for eight billion hours earlier at work.

He glanced up as they reached the door to go in. Hathway's had these huge windows all down the side of the building and you could see the breakfast counter and some of the booths in the front from the

main street. Steve had always thought it looked real, like, homey or cute or whatever. He scanned the diner almost on autopilot, reaching out to give Dustin a little shove between the shoulders when he stopped walking.

“Oh, my god, stop molesting me, I'm checking to see if I brought my allowance!”

“I've got money,” Steve said absently. He was still looking into the diner – Nancy Wheeler was sitting in the fifth booth from the front door. She looked like she was by herself and she was reading some big thick book. Steve watched as she reached out with a hand and tapped at her empty soda glass.

He nodded over towards the window. “Hey, look, Nancy's inside. Do you wanna go in and – ”

Dust's eyes almost popped out of his head and he whipped around to stare up through the glass (the brim of his baseball cap cracked Steve in the face). “WHAT?” he said loudly like an insane person. “Crap, are you serious?” He grabbed Steve's arm like a nutcase and yanked them both backwards, away from the window.

Steve's head almost bonked into the door; really, he was getting fuckin' manhandled. “Dustin, what the shit, man!” He shoved him back. “Jesus, what's your problem?”

“Okay, crisis averted, this is bad, uhhh, uhhh! We should just go to Mike's!” Dust was talking a lot. “The pizza place,” he added unnecessarily. He squished himself against the brick side of the building and looked around all crazy-eyed.

Mike's was like three blocks away, and never had any parking. “Uh, no, crazy person, we're not going to Mike's, we're already here,” Steve told him patiently.

“Yeah, but – ”

“You don't want to go in and say hi?”

Dust stared at him like he was dumb. “No, Steve! I don't!”

“What, why? Did something happen?” Steve was pretty sure Dustin had had, like, a thing for Nancy before, but that had been years ago, and way before Steve had ever dated her.

“Uh, no! I just want pizza now!”

“Okay, well, you just dragged me out here for a fuckin' milkshake,” Steve reminded him, this time not as patiently as he wanted. His head *really* fucking hurt and getting out of the sun immediately seemed pretty important. “I gotta talk to Nance anyway, she's been calling me.”

He felt pretty bad – it'd been more than a month since he'd really even thought about Nancy. He hadn't even *talked* to her, and maybe that made him kind of a bad person. He guessed he'd really kind of forgotten all about her now that he'd gotten back together with Bill. Hadn't meant to be that way; it'd just happened. Now he could say hey and say sorry.

Dust was still staring at him like a crazy person. “Why is she calling you?” he asked all loud.

“I don't know, man.” He reached out to tug open the diner door.

Dust grabbed his arm and yanked him back again; they probably looked like a comedy show out on the street. “Yeah, uhhhh, I don't think that's a smart idea,” he lisped.

“Dude, really? You *seriously* need to stop grabbing me.” Steve shook him off.

“Steve! Your significant other works like *five block away*, do you really want to chance *them* coming by and seeing us with your other woman?” Dustin was experimenting with gender-neutral pronouns this week apparently.

Steve stared at him. “What? Bill doesn't care about Nancy.”

“ARE YOU BRAIN-DAMAGED? OF COURSE HE DOES!” Dust yelled in his face, pronouns apparently forgotten.

Steve wiped some spit off his cheek. He was feeling even more

annoyed now. “Hey, we talked about her already, he knows we’re just friends.”

“You did?” Dust looked doubtful.

“Uh, sure,” Steve said; he hoped he sounded convincing. Anyway he and Bill *had* talked about Nancy, kind of. Once, anyway. Just that first night that they’d gotten back together, when they’d ended up making out on the couch – to Steve that counted as a good talk.

Anyway Bill had to know that Steve was totally nuts about him by now; he’d got him like two different kinds of flowers. Nancy wasn’t important. Bill wouldn’t care if Steve told him later that he’d seen her for like five minutes. At least he was pretty sure.

“Really?”

Okay Dustin was making him feel way less sure. “Yeah, it’s fine, man.” Dust kept on looking doubtful so Steve shrugged. “What? She’s – we’re friends.”

“Okay, first of all – “ Dustin stuck a finger in Steve’s face in what Steve felt was a really dramatic way – “NO, YOU’RE NOT!”

“Hey, yes we – “

“Second – “ he lifted another finger and made a peace sign – “did you become *friends* before or AFTER you cheated on YOU KNOW WHO last month?”

Steve smacked Dustin’s hand away. “I didn’t cheat on him, asshole!” He almost believed it. He didn’t really know what it had been now, after everything that had happened. A really stupid mistake.

“Okay, but Steve, don’t you think – “

“Look, man, it’s not a big deal. Don’t worry,” Steve told him, even though he knew Dust was pretty much incapable of not worrying. Jesus H. Steve wondered if all the kids really thought he’d cheated on Bill or something. “Go in and get your food, we’ll just go and say hey real quick.”

“Uh, no, this is a really bad idea, I feel nauseous.” The door to the diner jingled open and they both stepped back to let an older couple pass by the exit door. Linda had been right before; old people really did always eat dinner at like four-thirty.

“Going in?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Steve caught the door.

“NO, actually, thank you, we are just leaving this establishment – “ Dustin grabbed his arm like a toddler and tried to pull him back again. He was actually getting kind of strong.

“DUSTIN!” Steve smacked at him, not gently. “You fucking lunatic! What the hell's wrong with you?”

“Uh, nothing's wrong with me, I just don't want Billy to kill me for facilitating this meeting – “

Steve had to pretend he knew what *facilitating* meant. “Oh, my god, he's not going to do anything to y – “

“Listen, Steve, Billy's been totally cool with me lately, he gave me a BEER on Tuesday!”

“Yeah, I was there,” Steve reminded him patiently.

“He's my friend too!”

“Oh, is he?” Steve ran a hand through his hair. Dustin was making his headache way, way worse. “Huh. I thought he was, like, just a, a crazy psycho or whatever.”

Dust gasped all dramatic like he was in a soap opera about to go to commercial. “Why are you throwing that in my face, I was *distressed* when I said those things.”

“Okay, well, you still said them.”

“He is a crazy psycho, *and* he is *my friend*,” Dust lisped passionately. Jesus H. “*And* he's also your significant – “ he looked around – “*you know*, who is a crazy psycho. With mental trauma. And works right

down the street. Remember? Steve? So I think we should just go to Mike's and *not* talk to Nancy."

"Dude," Steve told him. "You're making a huge thing out of this, it really doesn't have to – "

Someone was tapping at the window. When Steve and Dustin looked up, Nancy was staring down at them and smiling. Steve waved like a moron and Nance waved back (Dustin groaned). *Hey!* she mouthed through the glass. *What are you guys doing?*

"Son of a bitch! Good job, Steve!" Dustin yelled; Nancy's eyes widened. It was almost funny.

"Well, now we have to go in," Steve told him; he nodded when Dustin groaned like a four-year old. "Okay, I know. I know. Come on." He grabbed Dust's arm and manhandled him through the doorway of the diner, then up the two steps and past the gumball machine in the entryway. He patted Dust on the back. "It'll be okay."

"Uhhhhh," Dustin moaned loudly like a gross toddler. He was shuffling his feet which was making the whole dragging-him thing kind of, well, a drag. Heh. He tugged on the brim of his baseball cap in a manic way. "No, no. This is a bad idea. Steve. Steve!"

"Man, it's *fine*." Hathaway's was a seat-yourself place; Steve nodded at the waitress over by the counter and started dragging Dust down the main aisle (Dustin did not go willingly). "Hey Nance," Steve said, in what he felt was a very suave manner. He may or may not have been a little out of breath from struggling with Dustin.

"Hey guys!" Nancy was smiling when they reached the table and she had her eyebrows raised up. "You wanna sit for a minute?" She looked over at Dustin, who was whipping his head back and forth and looking around like the FBI was going to bust in and tackle them at any second. "Um ... is he okay?"

Steve slid into the booth across from her. "Sure, he's great. Hey," he said again. "Sit down," he said to Dustin.

"Uhhhhh," Dust said like a crazy person. He sat down cautiously at

the end of the table with a big crumpled-up frown on his face.

Steve almost managed not to sigh. "Are you eatin' by yourself?" he asked Nancy.

"Oh! Um ... no." She looked down at her book and then back up. Her brow crinkled up. "I mean, kind of, not really. I mean, yes. I was here with Angela and her new guy, they just left. I was just, you know. Hanging out with my book." She made a little face.

"Oh. Cool." Steve filed away the information that Angela Davis had a boyfriend (who was not Billy). "We won't hang out for long. I just wanted to say hey. So. Hey."

"Hey." Nancy was smiling at him. "How are you guys?"

It felt like he'd had just fought for like ten minutes to get over here and now he didn't really have anything to say. "Uh, yeah, we're good."

Nancy opened her mouth to speak again but she was interrupted by the waitress bringing over sodas for him and Dustin. "Cokes, right?"

"Oh, yeah, thank you," Steve said; Dustin said: "NO FOOD FOR ME!" like a total asshole. He was so annoying that Steve ordered a burger. It was past five now anyway which meant it was totally time for first dinner.

"STEVE!" Dust actually looked scandalized.

"What?"

Dustin sighed loudly. He'd already slurped down practically a quarter of his soda in the twelve seconds it'd taken the server to write down Steve's order; he was clearly pretty stressed. "Nothing," he said all glum.

Nancy had her eyebrows raised up again. "Hey, are you okay?" she asked Dustin.

"Sure, sure, sure." He stress-drank even more soda.

“Uh, he wanted to sit at the counter,” Steve told Nance.

“No, I didn't, I wanted to get pizza and not get murdered!”

“Um. Okay, I'm really sorry about that.” Nance closed her book up and folded her hands up over it, looking at Dust. She seemed pretty amused by him being a crazy person; Steve guessed he'd always liked that about her. She and Dust stared at each other. “How's, um, what's her – how's Rebecca doing?”

Dust gave her a dark look. “You don't get any points for remembering my girlfriend's name, Nancy, I've been dating her for eight months.”

Jesus Christ. He was being really frickin' rude, even for Dustin. “Man,” Steve said warningly.

Dust slumped down in the booth and chewed on his straw like a cow. “What?” he mumbled; Steve raised his eyebrows and Dust sighed again. “She's great thanks,” he said like he was being tortured.

Nancy didn't really look insulted or upset. Sometimes Steve forgot that she'd known Dust for way longer than him. “Okay,” she just said again. She was smiling a little. She looked over at Steve and then did a kind of double-take. “Steve, um, what are you wearing?”

“What?” Steve looked down at himself. He was still just in his clothes from work – the shirt he wanted to wear was over at Bill's. His tie today wasn't even super stupid or anything; it had lizards on it. It was his best tie actually. “What's wrong with it? I was just at work.”

“Oh, right,” Nancy said. She had a funny look on her face — Steve hadn't been around her much so he didn't know what it was that she looked like anymore.

Dustin slurped more soda through his chewed up straw. “Steve works at his dad's office, did you forget that?” he said like a little asshole.

“Oh!” Nance said again. Her eyes widened. “You know what, you're ... “ She paused for a long time. “I'm sorry, I, I actually did forget. That's dumb of me. Sorry.”

Steve didn't answer her for a second. He'd been working at the office

for over a year now, since right after school had let out last summer. It's not like he and Nance had even been together then or anything, but they'd seen each other plenty of times this year – he was always around with the dumb kids and all. He'd driven her around a couple times, gotten drunk at her place on New Year's Eve. He'd definitely told her about goin' to work at his dad's company.

He didn't know why he felt annoyed right away because she didn't remember where he worked. It was stupid to get annoyed about that. He just felt annoyed in general, he guessed, from being at work and then from Dust acting like a little idiot. It's not like he knew what Nancy was up to lately either. Maybe she just thought he didn't work or something, as if he could get away with that at home.

He pushed the annoyed feeling down. It didn't really matter he guessed. “Don't worry about it.”

“I'm sorry,” Nance said again. “You like it there?”

“Yeah, it's, uh, fine.” He was so interesting.

Dustin sighed hugely; Steve envisioned all the condiments blowing off the table. “I need another soda,” he announced. He jumped up from the table like a crazy person and rushed off to the counter; Steve and Nancy watched him go. When they turned back to each other Steve realized he still didn't really know what to say to her.

She stared back at him too. “Um, you're wearing your glasses,” she said finally. “I think I've seen you in those about three whole times.”

“Yeah, my eyes hurt today,” Steve told her. “I look like a frickin' nerd right now.”

“No you don't,” she said right away; she was too kind. She rested her chin in her hand and started smiling. “You know, you kinda look like that guy from – “ her mouth twitched – “uh, that guy from *Little Shop of Horrors* or something.”

“Oh, wow. Okay,” Steve said. Nancy started laughing; she actually wasn't too kind. “You know what, uh, I can actually get my food to go – ” he moved as if to slide out of the booth; Nancy laughed some

more and grabbed his arm.

“Oh, my god, stop! Steve, I'm *joking!*”

He felt okay with her laughing even though she was being a terrible person to him. It seemed way easier to make her laugh now that he wasn't obsessed with what she was thinkin' about every second. “Yeah, thanks a lot.”

“It's just, you know, it's like the tie and everything, it's not bad. You look really grown up.”

Steve *was* a grown up; he could cook like six things now. Bill had taught him how to change a tire too.

He decided not to tell her about all that though. “Hey, I'm sorry, I meant to call you before. Mike said you wanted to me call you, you okay?”

“Um, yeah, what's up with that? Your boyfriend comes back and you give me the cold shoulder,” Nance teased him. “I just wanted to see how you were.”

“Oh, right.” He felt bad for a split-second; he'd thought maybe she'd needed something. He didn't know what she could've wanted from him but girls were weird sometimes.

“So how are you?”

“Uh, you asked that already.”

“Oh. I mean, right.” Nancy just stared at him again. Steve guessed she didn't know what to say to him either, and it felt totally awkward. “But ... okay, how are you really?”

Steve looked at her lookin' back at him; it was like he was seeing her for the first time in a while. Some time over the last month she'd dyed her hair blonde. That was kinda funny to Steve since he was currently dating, well, a very hot blonde. Nancy was wearing a blue dress and she looked nice, but just nice, he realized.

It felt weird to be sitting across from someone who you'd wanted for

so long and to – not want them anymore; it kind of felt like a punch to the stomach or something. Steve almost wanted to laugh. It was like he was free or something. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You’re just okay?”

“Uh, I don’t know.” He didn’t really know what she wanted from him or what she wanted him to tell her. “I’m, I’m good.”

Nance had an elbow on the table, leaning over, and she was playing with her hair again. “You never tell me anything anymore.”

“What, do you blame me?”

Her eyes got big and Steve felt bad in two seconds. He guessed she looked hurt or something. She bit her bottom lip, not looking at him. “Okay,” she said softly.

Crap. Apparently he shouldn’t be allowed to talk to his exes in public. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that like, uh – “

“No, that’s – you know what? That’s fair.”

“That was rude of me – ”

“No, you’re fine,” Nance told him. She sat up a little, tucked a lock of hair behind her ears. “Um, that’s my fault, I think. I guess we ... hey, we don’t really know each other anymore.”

He didn’t really know how to answer for a moment. “Guess not.” It felt weird to say it. They just sat there for a couple seconds.

“Hey, I just wanted to – “ she looked up at him – “Steve, I just wanted to see how you were. I feel really bad about everything that happened last month. I feel like I made it so much worse.”

She hadn’t made anything worse. Steve had done that, trying to make himself feel better and – take her up on her offer or whatever. He actually couldn’t believe that they’d almost hooked up again. It felt like it’d been a billion years ago. “That’s okay. I mean, everything turned out okay.”

“Yeah?” She was playing around with her huge purse. “You know, Mike told me about – well, I guess he's been over at ... Billy's apartment?”

“Yeah, he got a place.”

“I figured. I mean, Mike said something about you guys all at the movies, or – so I figured that's, that's good, right? Like, you guys are good again?”

“Yeah, we're good,” Steve told her.

“Okay.” She folded her hands up on the table and smiled at him. “How good?”

Steve laughed. He felt kind of stupid; he definitely wasn't going to tell her any gay details at Hathaway's. “Uh, I don't know,” he said. It was weird to talk about it with Nancy, totally weird. “Pretty good.”

“Oh, pretty good, okay.” Another smile and her nose scrunched up. “Is he really babysitting Eleven next weekend?”

“I guess so. It's weird, right?”

“Yeah – kind of. Well, we're going on vacation on Friday, so I – ”

“Oh yeah? Where are you guys gonna to go this year?” Nance's family did some big trip every July or August.

Nancy was making another face. “Grand Canyon?”

“Oh hey!” Steve said. “That's cool, that's really nice.”

“Yeah! I mean, I'll still be around, even with going to school, but it'll be like our last – well.” She was doing her cute thing where she twirled her hair and looked down at the tabletop. Steve had always liked it when he could make her do that. “It's just, you know, that's a *lot* of hours in the car with my dad.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“It was nicer when I was younger, you know, and I had ... “ she

stopped talking for a moment and looked at the table top again. She wasn't twirling her hair anymore though.

She was probably thinking about her friend Barb; Steve looked at her and didn't say anything either. He'd been together with Nancy for almost a year so he'd heard a lot about Barbara. They'd always done the family vacations together and all that stuff.

Finally she started talking again. "I just – sorry. Mike and my parents have been totally nuts. I think that Mike thought he was gonna get, you know, some romantic weekend with Eleven since she was going to be – um, at Billy's – "

"Oh, yeah, good luck with that, Bill would totally murder him," Steve said.

He didn't know if he should feel glad or not that she hadn't started talking about Barb. Sometimes it had felt like Barb been half of what they'd ever even talked about, and they'd ate dinner over at her folks' place nearly once a week for almost six months. Steve had wanted to do it at the time and it's not like he – God, it wasn't like he'd minded Nance talkin' about her dead friend a lot. But it had always been this thing between them. He'd always felt like he couldn't *do* anything or comfort her like she wanted; it was like he'd never known how to say what she wanted.

Nancy was laughing and smiling at him right now though so he felt okay. "Yep, we are spoiling *all* his plans. So he and my dad have been really going at – "

"All right, I am ready to go now." Dust had re-appeared with his new soda; it was already half-empty.

He made Steve laugh. "Hey, man, can you chill out for one second?"

"I am chilled out, Steve, I am super chill all the time," Dustin said severely; Steve laughed again and Dust grinned down at him for a second. He slid his soda back down onto the table. "Hey, I think I should go talk to Rebecca. Do you think you could give me a ride over there?"

“Yeah, sure. You should go talk to her,” Steve told him.

“I seriously just said that, thanks.” Dust was rolling his eyes so Steve smacked his arm. “Hey!” He leaned over Steve to grab his soda again and glanced up to look out the window. His mouth went slack and his eyes got real big; Steve wondered if he saw Hopper or something (Dust also thought Hop could be pretty intense).

“Hey, what's wrong with y – “

“Uh, yeah. Just so you know,” Dust interrupted him loudly, eyes still locked on the window. “Billy's staring at us.”

“*What?*” Dustin pointed and Steve and Nancy turned to look.

It was kinda like a cartoon or a bad movie or something: Bill's car was stopped on the street right across from the diner at the red light, and he and Max *were* staring at them. Max was leaned up in her seat and glaring away. Steve locked eyes with Bill for a second and it kinda felt like he'd gotten caught with his pants down or something; he totally froze.

Everything really only lasted for a couple seconds. Bill just stared at him; Steve could see his fingers twisting on the steering wheel of the Camaro. The way that Bill was lookin' at him made Steve feel really bad, like he was doing something wrong.

Then he turned away. He said something to Max, and she said something back, still staring at them. Then the light turned green and Bill drove away without turning back again. Shit.

“Shit,” Dustin said like Steve's creepy twin. He actually looked terrified; it would have been funny if ... well, if there was anything funny. “Oh, my god, Steve, you're totally dead.” Dustin was maybe not the best at reassurances.

“Shut up,” Steve told him right away. He did kind of feel this, like, impending-doom feeling. Kinda like when you were massively late for work, or when you forgot a test at school and all your friends were talkin' about how they'd studied for two hours last night (that happened a lot). Or, you know. When you got in trouble with your

boyfriend. Steve didn't know if he was actually in trouble – he didn't know how it worked with boyfriends – but it felt like he was in trouble.

Nancy was turning back to look at him with wide eyes. “Oh god, I'm sorry,” she said. “I didn't know – oh, were you meeting him here or something?”

“Uh, no. We were just gonna to go his place later.”

“Steve has really great timing,” Dust put in dryly. “As you might remember.”

Nance ignored him; she was frowning at Steve. “Is he going to be mad?”

“Have you talked to him for two minutes?” Dustin asked her. “He's always mad!”

Steve rubbed his forehead; that wasn't really true. “No he's not.”

“Yeah, you should say your goodbyes now, Steve is totally dead, I knew this would happen.”

“Shut up, no I'm not,” Steve said, annoyed. Dust gave him a big look. “What, he doesn't tell me who I can talk to.” He was independent, he didn't add. Dust gave him an even bigger look.

“I'm really sorry,” Nance said again. She was still frowning and she definitely didn't look like she thought Steve was independent. “I don't want him to think that we're ... or that I'm ...” She trailed off.

“That you're what?” Dustin asked her loudly.

“Okay, hey.” Steve shoved him and then looked back over at Nancy. “Hey, don't worry about it, we're just talking.”

It really wasn't a big deal, at least he didn't think so, even with the doom-feeling. They *had* just been talkin'. He could feel Dust about to say something shitty beside him and shoved him again on principle; Dustin actually growled like a dog or something.

Nance didn't look too reassured. "Well, does he know about – " she looked over at Dustin and faltered – "um, about last month?"

"Nancy, everybody knows about last month!" Dustin yapped. He was nearly finished his new soda somehow.

Nancy's face went perfectly blank and the tips of her ears turned red. "Oh," she said. "Really? That's – that's great." She rubbed the side of her face like she was real embarrassed.

"Sorry," Steve told her. "Uh, it's not everybody."

"No, no, you're not – " she sat up a little. "I'm really sorry, I didn't – I don't want to cause any problems with you guys. I really didn't mean – I just wanted to see how you were."

Steve didn't really know what to say to her. His headache was definitely back in full force. "No, you're not – it's fine, don't worry about it. I'll just go talk to him. It's not a big deal."

"Okay. Okay." She looked kind of overwhelmed or something and Steve didn't know why. "I'm sorry. You know what, I have to get home anyway, I should – probably go – "

"Uh, okay, it's not – "

Nancy stood up, gathering her book and purse together: she nearly crashed into the waitress who was bringing over Steve's burger and fries. "Oh god! Sorry!" She looked over at Steve again; her eyes were so big. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to – I'll just talk to you later."

"Okay," Steve said again; he felt kind of empty and he didn't really know what to say or how he should feel. Nance ducked her head and slipped out the door, leaving him and Dustin staring after her.

The waitress put Steve's food down in front of them. She looked over at Dustin. "Do you need another refill, babe?" she asked him.

Dust slid his soda cup over to her. "Make it a double, please," he said dramatically. Steve rolled his eyes.

They didn't stay at the diner for very long after Nance left – Dust said he didn't want to be caught at the scene of the crime again, and Steve figured he should really go over to Bill's and find out how dead he was.

“Son of a bitch, Steve, I hope you're happy,” Dust was going on and on with eighty fries in his mouth. He'd been ranting and stress-eating all of Steve's food for the last five minutes and Steve had been letting him; he wasn't exactly hungry anymore. “I told you this would happen! Didn't I tell you? Hey, if you guys break up, do you think Billy would continue on as my personal trainer, I really need him.”

“Oh, my god, WE'RE NOT GOING TO BREAK UP,” Steve said finally; two ladies at the counter turned and looked at him so he leaned forward and lowered his voice a little. “I didn't do anything!”

Dustin just stared at him (with eighty fries in his mouth). He looked pretty unimpressed, and kind of like a weird curly-haired cow. “Okay. If you say so.”

One of his least favorite things, Steve had just decided, was talkin' about Bill in the diner with Dustin. “Dude, why are you being so frickin' weird about this? It's not a big deal.”

Dust stared at him some more. He swallowed the eighty fries and then ate some more. “Billy's my friend,” he said finally.

“Yeah, uh, so am I.”

“I know that! You're my *best* friend, Steve!”

Steve had to take a few seconds to not to feel emotional. “Okay, thanks.”

“You know, YOU COULD SAY IT BACK FOR ONCE,” Dustin said; some of the fries flew out of his mouth and landed on Steve's shirt. “Oh, sorry. Look, I don't want to pick sides, or go to your funeral. I'm just saying, you know, if I saw Rebecca somewhere with Rick Perello, I wouldn't be really thrilled about it.”

“Yeah, I don't know who that is.”

“That doesn't matter, he is a going to be a SENIOR, and he's on the LACROSSE TEAM,” Dust said like a maniac. He ate more fries and added darkly, “They got ice cream together last year.”

Apparently that was a really important detail. “I didn't get any ice cream,” Steve told him.

“No, you just made out with Nancy last month,” Dust said, totally eviscerating him in two seconds. Jesus. “Steve! How do you not know this, you've had like a million girlfriends, it looks *really* bad.”

“Bill's not a girl,” Steve pointed out.

“Okay, same difference.” Dustin was still chomping away. “He probably thinks you guys made plans to meet up or something.”

Oh. Shit. He hadn't thought of that. He didn't know if Bill would really think that, but he was starting to feel more and more definitely dead. “Well, we didn't do that,” he said anyway. “We were just talkin', I'm allowed to do that.”

“Are you?” Dust asked him all smart. Apparently the kids thought Bill had him on some kinda leash or something. That was kind of annoying, too. Maybe *Steve* was the one who had the leash for once.

He took some of his fries too even though he didn't want them. Why would a dead person want french fries. “Look, I didn't do anything!” he told Dust again. “Aside from the actually *really* creepy convenience of, uh, Bill seein' me and Nancy together again, there's not – okay, by the way, how the hell were you *right* about that?”

“Uh, because it's not convenience, it's common sense! We're in the middle of Main Street, Steve!” Dustin told him. “This is the only place we all hang out at together. Aside from Mike's.” He inhaled more food and added, “The pizza place.”

“Got it, thanks.”

“I'm just saying. You know, the last time that Billy saw you guys together, it didn't exactly end up so great for him. WHAT?” Dust said,

looking at Steve's face.

"Nothing." Okay he was starting to feel pretty dumb (not unusual), and really, really crappy. Well, more crappy than he already felt.

"Did you forget about that or something?"

"No, I didn't forget about it," Steve snapped.

"Okay, okay, I'm just saying, don't scream at me. Hey, don't worry, he probably won't get abducted this time or crash his car, Max is with him," Dust said in his annoying soothing voice; Steve stared at him. Dustin just crunched on a fry and looked back at him. "What, you think he really wants to see you flirting with Nancy?"

Jesus Christ. "I wasn't fucking flirting with her! How the hell was I flirting with her?"

"Uh, don't get mad at me because you needed to eat dinner with your ex-girlfriend," Dust said, still eating Steve's food.

"Dude, I didn't even frickin' do anything – "

"Okay, I'm you," Dustin told him seriously, leaning over the tabletop; Steve sighed. Dust cleared his throat and then started speaking in a dopey voice that really sounded more like Barney the Dinosaur than Steve. *"Uh, look, it's Nancy! Hi Nancy! Hi Nancy! Hey can I sit with you? Hi, hi Nancy. Gee, are you going to the Grand Canyon, Nancy? Oh, look, there's Billy! Oh, Nancy, don't worry about Billy! Are you okay, Nancy?"*

Steve kicked him under the table, hard; Dustin yelped and then laughed at him. "It's called having a conversation, asshole!" He didn't even sound like that anyway.

"Okay, okay! I told you this was a bad idea. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but nobody wants to go down the Steve-Nancy road again, you are way less annoying now that you got with Billy."

"I am?" Steve said; he didn't know if he should feel insulted or not.

"Don't worry, you're still pretty annoying." Dustin grinned at Steve's

face, then his expression turned thoughtful again. "So how much trouble do you think you're in?"

"I don't know." He was definitely feeling way worse now, and kind of guilty – he hadn't really thought about all the stuff Dust was saying. Not the stupid Nancy stuff (he *definitely* didn't sound like that) but all the other stuff he'd said about Bill. It made him feel like total shit.

A half-hour ago he'd just wanted Dustin to shut the hell up and he'd wanted to, well, talk to Nancy. Actually he was pretty sure that Dust being a total weirdo freak about everything had been making him want to talk to Nance even more. He hadn't thought about Bill actually walking by (or driving by) and seeing him like they were in some corny TV movie or something.

It was just that usually when people told Steve not to do something, it made him want to do the thing even more. It was one of his talents, like when Nance had said once that they didn't have to spend *every* weekend together (why not?), or when his mom told him not to talk so much smack on his dad, or back in sophomore year of high school when Tommy'd said there was no way Steve could drink a whole bottle of gin in one go.

Or it was like – okay, better example – last summer when Billy had walked in on Eleven using her powers or whatever. All of the brats, especially Dustin, had begged and begged Steve not to go talk to Bill about it, and they'd all said not to bug him. All it'd done was just make him want to bug Bill even more. That'd ended up working out for him but he usually got too stupid about stuff. He could have just said hey to Nancy real quick and sat at the counter like Dustin had wanted to. It wasn't like they'd even had some great conversation or anything.

"Steve? Are you having a stroke?" Dust said; Steve guessed that he must have been making some kind of face.

"No, I was just – nothing," he said. *Just thinkin' about the fact that I'm an idiot who can't think anything through for more than a second*, he didn't add. Apparently Dust knew that already, anyway. "Okay, yeah, I'm definitely in trouble."

Dust shrugged. "I guess it's not like you made out with her again, you showed a lot of restraint."

"Jesus, I don't want to *make out with* – "

"I have just felt unlucky today, I knew my fortune cookie would come true!"

"What? What fortune cookie?" Steve asked him sharply.

Dustin stared. "Nothing, what?"

"When'd you get Chinese food without me?" And here Dust was trying to make *him* feel guilty.

"Umm, I didn't, what are you talking about," Dust mumbled, lying. "Look, I can vouch for you if it comes to it, I won't let Billy kick your ass again." He changed the subject in two seconds, then fixed Steve with a big look. "But I really don't want it to come to that, I *really* need my track coach, we decided I have to hit my goal weight by September sixth," he told Steve severely.

Steve tried not to feel overwhelmed by Dustin's unwavering support. "Look, are you ready yet? I just wanna get outta here."

"Oh, *now* you want to go." He'd had basically eaten everything on Steve's plate anyhow; the table shook a little as he stood up. "Can you still take me to Rebecca's? Or maybe I should go to Billy's with you, you might need backup."

"Thanks, I'll be okay." He was pretty sure.

"If you say so. I really prefer my limbs to remain un-broken, but I would take at least one punch for you if needed, Steve." Dust was really loyal; Steve was about to get all emotional again.

"I'm not gonna get punched," Steve told him anyway. He was less sure.

It was getting kind of busy in the diner, and it took a couple minutes to flag down their waitress so that Steve could pay for his food, then it took a couple minutes longer for him to drive Dustin out to

Rebecca's house; it was too much time.

By the time he finally dropped Dust off, he was feeling way less confident about the not-getting-punched thing. He felt kinda nervous or something, like a kid about to get in trouble. He didn't like goin' to over Bill's feeling that way, and it made him even more annoyed, too. He hadn't even *done* anything.

Steve didn't know how he could feel so much stuff about something so stupid. He just wanted to get to Bill's place so he could make sure they were cool and all. He didn't really think he'd done anything wrong. He'd been waiting to go and see Bill all day so this whole thing was extra stupid.

For the whole drive to the apartment complex he kept seeing Billy starin' at him from the car, the way his face had looked. Then he thought about Dust yelling at him and saying *The last time he saw you guys together it didn't end up so great for him!* and felt even worse. Once he finally parked his car out on the corner of Broad Street, he'd gotten himself pretty worked up. He was in 'a state' as his mom would say (then Dad would say some brilliant shit like 'What, a state of idiocy?'). He was so dumb.

Steve sat in his car for a couple minutes and listened to the radio to calm himself down. It was POWER 99 out in Indianapolis and it was 5:30 on a Friday so it was Power Hour; Max and Bill would be gaggin' all over the car if they were in here. Steve listened to two songs – 'It's a Sin' by the Pet Shop Boys and then Heart's new song 'Alone' came on (Bill would like that one) – and then he felt mostly okay again, maybe because of the Heart song.

Billy's Camaro was parked in the alleyway across the street anyway so at least Steve knew he hadn't crashed it or gotten abducted again. Jesus Christ. Dustin had got him all freaked out.

He went on into the apartment building and headed up the steps to meet his fate. He kinda felt like he was in a horror movie as he walked down the little hallway, probably since Bill and Max had been makin' him watch so many lately. He could feel the creepy synth or whatever kicking in as he knocked on the door (it was probably just the TV). Then he felt stupid because he usually didn't knock; Bill was

really bad at locking his place up.

"It's open!" Max yelled from inside so Steve opened the door and went on in.

Billy didn't seem to be around but Max and Will were sitting together in the kitchen. There was a bunch of plastic grocery bags up on the counter and Max and Will had an opened box of popsicles between them at the table. They were Disney Pops and Max was eating a purple Donald Duck. She was crashed out in one of the kitchen chairs with her legs stretched out, balancing her sneakers on the opened dishwasher door (her dress was really short and somehow Steve managed not to make a comment right away).

"Hey," he said instead of making a comment right away.

Will was squished at the corner of the table by the wall; he was like the skinniest person so the kids were always stickin' him in the corner by the wall. He had one of Bill's decks of cards out in front of him. "Hey Steve!"

Max looked up at him and made a face like she'd seen a dead slug or a deformed baby bird. Things were going awesome already. She bit Donald's purple head off; Steve felt slight terror. "Oh, it's *you*," she said all moody. "Where's Dustin at?"

"Never thought I'd hear you say that." Will was looking up from his cards and smiling.

Max almost smiled too but her ill-will towards Steve was too great apparently. She commenced glaring. "I thought he was coming with us later."

Steve sat at the table too (Max gave him another nasty look). "Yeah, I dropped him at Becca's house, he said he'll meet you guys later."

"Figures."

"Do you know what they're fighting about?" Will asked him.

"I dunno, was gonna ask you."

Will shuffled the cards. He had a little frown on his face now. "Who knows. I feel bad for Rebecca, Dustin's been acting super weird since school let out."

"No, before that too," Max put in. "Probably since before I met him!" Will laughed.

Dustin was always super-weird; Steve didn't feel the need to point that out. "Where's your brother at?" he asked Max.

"He went downstairs to do his laundry." Max gave him a scathing look. "I wouldn't go down there if I were you."

Jesus H. "Okay," Steve said. "Hey, is he ticked off at me?"

"I don't *know*," she snapped. Steve sat back in the chair and looked at her. "What?"

"Why would he be mad at you?" Will asked.

"I don't know, I'm not – "

"We just caught Steve on a *date* with Nancy at Hathaway's," Max interrupted loudly, blabbing all his business in two seconds.

"Oh, my god, it wasn't a date, you dramatic baby," Steve told her. Max rolled her eyes and slurped her popsicle at him.

Will turned and stared at him like he was a deformed baby bird too; he looked really incredulous or something. "Why would you do that?" he asked like Steve'd just said he was bangin' Nancy on the table or something.

"I didn't do anything!" Steve said for like the sixth time. Will just stared at him blankly. "Jesus, I was out with Dustin, we just sat down and talked to her for like ten minutes."

"Oh." Will was still kinda giving him the deformed-bird look. "Um, okay."

"If you don't want to go out with Billy now or something you could just tell him, you don't have to sneak around with Nancy if you hate

us so much,” Max burst out all nasty.

God, she was really digging into him. It was making him feel really horrible actually. He'd just hung out here with her and Bill 'til past midnight yesterday; obviously he didn't hate either of them. It was the opposite in fact. “I'm not *sneaking around*, I was getting food, you frickin' – “ Steve stopped himself before he said something crappy too. “What the hell are you talking about, did he say something?”

“No.” She slurped her popsicle again; she had this moody little look on her face that made her look about seven years old. “He didn't say anything about you.”

“Okay. That's great,” Steve said and then didn't know what to say. He guessed he really was in trouble after all which was so dumb.

Max shifted in her chair and slammed her feet down on the floor. “Deal me in, you've been shuffling for like eight minutes,” she commanded Will.

“Okay.” Will looked at Steve kind of uncertainly. “Do you ... wanna play War with us? We can do a triple battle.”

“Uh, thanks. I'm okay,” Steve said; Max would probably try to find some way to actually physically injure him if he played. He wouldn't even be able to retaliate or nothin' since she was a girl and also Bill's sister. Anyway, the TV was on too, so he was good.

“Okay.” Will gave Max her half of the cards. The kids started playing their game and Steve stared at the TV over Max's shoulder. It was not exactly fun to do it because she kept lookin' up and glaring her various super-glares at him. She was making him feel weird as shit, like he'd actually done something wrong.

“Hey, where's Lucas at?” Steve asked her after about six minutes of dirty looks (and two games of War).

“Who cares.” Huh.

“Don't worry, they're fighting too,” Will told him confidentially.

“WILL!” Max kicked him under the table.

Will yelped and flipped some of his cards up in the air like in a cartoon; Max did not look amused. "Sorry! I didn't know it was a secret!"

"It's *not*."

"Then – why'd you kick me?" Will was staring at Max in a way that said he found women about as incomprehensible as Steve did. Max ignored him anyway.

"How come you're fightin'?" Steve asked her.

Super-glare #57. "None of your *business*," Max sneered at him.

"Jesus. Okay, forget I asked."

"I already did!"

Steve rubbed his eyebrow and managed again not to make a comment; she was making' his fucking head hurt again and he didn't feel like starting with her.

Will shrugged at him. He and Max turned back to their card game and Steve kept lookin' at the TV and waiting for Bill to show up.

It was a really fun time. After a couple minutes more Bill and Max's cat came lumbering out of Bill's bedroom and wandered over to Steve. It was kinda funny, because Steve had figured Bill would get a dog right away, but instead Max had brought this old cat home a couple weeks ago. She was pretty cute (the cat, not Max). Billy acted like a huge asshole about it and said they weren't keeping her but they were probably keeping her. She had a little collar and everything that Eleven had got her; Bill had ripped the bell off it last week in a fit of rage.

Anyway Steve liked the cat – she'd only scratched him a couple of times and she was real fluffy which he thought was a good quality in a cat. He thought she was pretty tough. She was cool even if nobody could pick out a name for her – Dust had said 'Chewy' which Steve thought was pretty cute too.

Chewy was his only ally right now, apparently. She hopped up onto

the table so that he could pet her so Steve petted her for a couple minutes – Max glared over at her like she was a traitor – and then finally Bill burst in with his laundry. He stared at the kids playin' cards and Steve petting the cat at the table. He just stood there not saying anything.

“Hey,” Steve said to him; Max scowled at her cards.

Bill looked at him like he was surprised to see him or something. “Hey,” he said shortly (Steve still couldn't tell if he was in trouble or not). He dropped his clothes on the couch, then glared and stalked over to all the bags the counter. “Max, are you fuckin' serious? I told you to put this shit away.”

“I'm gonna do it before I go!”

“When you going?” Bill demanded. “It ain't soon enough.” Max smiled sweetly at him.

Steve watched Bill huff around with his groceries. “Do you need help?” he asked him.

The fridge slammed shut. “Nope.”

Okay. “Okay,” Steve said.

Chewy hopped up on the counter and over to Bill and his groceries. She sat swishin' her tail and watched him put his stuff away.

Billy made a face at her. “What you want?” he asked gruffly; she stepped on one of the plastic bag and butted her head against his arm. “No, go away.” He pushed at the side of her face, not that hard.

“Just pet her, you know you want to,” Will told him; he smiled when Bill glared at him.

Bill picked the cat up off the counter and tossed her onto the couch. He grabbed his clothes and stalked off into his room, then came back out to put the rest of the groceries away. He stood by the counter staring at Steve. “You staying here?” he asked all loud like they were in the middle of an argument.

“Uh, I guess,” Steve said like an articulate playboy. He felt really awkward and he didn't know why.

“Okay.” Billy started rifling through the fridge. “You want a drink?”

“I'm okay.”

“Okay.” He kept looking through the fridge.

“You could ask if I want something,” Max told him; Bill ignored her. He got a beer and went and crashed down on the couch with the cat. Steve kept on sitting at the table like an idiot. He *definitely* felt like he was in trouble.

This was totally dumb and Steve didn't feel like starting some big thing in front of the kids. He and Bill hadn't really had a fight or anything like this before. Well, if they were having a fight or whatever. It wasn't like they hadn't gotten into stupid arguments, but nobody had really known about them before. It felt really fucking weird to be maybe-fighting in front of Max and Will; it felt fucking stupid. Steve didn't know what to do.

He sat at the table like a dummy for a couple minutes more and then finally stood up (he banged his knee on the table like usual). He went and leaned over the back of the couch. “Hey, can I sit with you?”

Bill was just sitting and holding his beer; he was turning the bottle-cap over and over in one hand. “I guess.”

“Okay.” He sat down next to Bill and Bill didn't even move or look up at him; Chewy stared at them both from her spot on the coffee table. It was so great.

“Ummm,” Will was saying loudly over in the kitchen. “We should ... probably go soon, right?”

“Why? It's only six.” That was Max. Steve flopped his head back and looked at the kids upside down; Max glared at him again.

“Um ... because ... “ Will looked over at Steve and Bill and then back at Max. “I have to do that thing at work first ... so ... “

“What thing? You don't work til Sunday,” Max said like a dope; Will stared at her and she jerked upright. “OH, RIGHT!” she said. “Okay, I guess.” She stood up and snatched the cards away from Will, shuffling them messily and stacking them on the counter. “Billy, we're going now!”

Bill was still an immovable object on the couch with his beer. “Whatever.”

Max walked around the side of the couch and leaned down to give Billy a hug; he yowled like he was dyin'. “GET OFFA ME!”

Max ignored him. She hugged him again and then kissed the side of his face; Billy gagged in this real dramatic way and Max ignored him some more. “Please feed Chewy, she eats dinner at eight PM.”

“Oh, does she?” Bill sounded like she was being funny.

“And don't overfeed her!”

“Jesus, okay.” He paused for a second. “Hey, be outside at ten-thirty, I'll pick ya up.”

“I don't need a ride, I was gonna go to – “

“I don't care,” Bill reminded her. “Your mom said ten-thirty on Fridays.”

“God, that's not fair! What about when I work til eleven?”

“S'what just she said.”

“Okay, fine.” Steve watched as Max stood there starin' down at Bill on the couch like a weird person. She leaned over and put her arms around his shoulder again, then whispered something in his ear.

Billy made a horrible face. “Oh, my god! Fuckin' go already! I said I don't care!”

“Okay, okay!”

Will had got up from the table too; he was by the door already. Max

snagged his arm for a second as she went to get her keys from the bookshelf behind the couch. "Bye Billy," Will said (he did not hug or kiss Bill goodbye). "Um, see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'll come get you."

"Okay! Bye Steve," Will said too.

"See ya, have fun." Will smiled at him and Max only glowered in response. When they left she made a big point of slamming the door shut extra hard, sending poor Chewy dashing off to the bathroom.

Then it was just him and Billy left not talking to each other. Steve knew he was pretty dumb and all but he could read a room, and after about a year he could read Billy Hargrove too. Bill was totally freezing him out. "You guys still going to see that movie tomorrow?"

"Yep." He was even more of a chatterbox than usual.

"Okay," Steve said. "So can we talk about –"

"What you wanna do?" Bill interrupted him.

"Uh, it doesn't matter."

"Okay." Bill kept on watching the TV. Then he said, "Cut your date short to come over here?"

Yep, there it was. "Nope, I didn't," Steve told him. "Look, I dunno what you think –"

"I don't think nothin'. I was just asking you a question."

Steve stared at Bill and Bill kept on watching the TV; it was just this rerun of *Crime Story* from last year and it wasn't even a good episode. Steve kept on staring at him. "Hey, are you really ticked off at me?"

Bill drank his beer. "Nope," he said.

"Uh, okay." Billy was right next to him but he felt really far away. Like even the way he was sitting or holding himself or whatever felt really far away. It was making Steve feel really shitty.

Steve knew that he'd thought before that there were two different Billys now, but there were actually like four or five probably. Sometimes Bill could be really sweet or he could be totally goofy like when he talked about *Star Wars* or when he and Max started on lecturing Steve about their horror movies or whatever. Bill could be really annoying too or he could be really angry or he could be, well. Whatever he was being now. Really cold. "Hey, I wasn't doing anything with Nancy," Steve told him. "I dunno what you think, I wasn't like – uh, I didn't meet up with her or something. I wouldn't do that to – I wouldn't do that without tellin' you."

Bill turned and gave him this really fake smile and Steve guessed it was the wrong thing to say somehow. Billy always got this mean grin on his face when he was making fun of Steve real bad or if they were fighting or something; in his head Steve called it the *You're Bullshit* smile. "Oh yeah? That's real sweet, thanks for clearing that up for me." He stopped smiling and turned back to the TV.

Jesus. "Uh, why are you doing that?" Steve asked him.

"What?" Bill kept on watching the TV and Steve sat there staring at him.

"Okay, are you really gonna sit there all night actin' pissed off at me?"

Billy drank his beer. "I'm not pissed off at you."

"Right, that's great." Steve sat back on the couch and ran a hand through his hair. "Look, you're obviously ticked off at me, I didn't even do shit. I just went and talked to her for like ten minutes, am I not allowed to do that?"

"I don't care what you do," Bill told him.

"Okay," Steve said again. "That's great."

Billy didn't say anything else and Steve just sat there; he kind of didn't know what to do. He wasn't sure how he'd screwed everything up in just a couple of hours. He hadn't *done* anything, he reminded himself again. Bill was obviously pissed off at him even if he wasn't

saying it. It made no sense that he wasn't saying it; they weren't a couple of girls or something.

Steve didn't know how to – do this shit with a guy; he felt totally dumb. He didn't know if it was the same rules as dating a chick. It should be the same rules but he didn't know jack shit apparently. Bill was just sitting with his beer and he kept on ignoring Steve and watching the TV.

Steve sat there too and tried to figure out what he'd done that was so bad. He wondered if he would've been upset or whatever to see, like, Nancy and Jonathan hangin' out together back when he and Nance had been dating; he didn't think he would have been. Then again he was a great big idiot and he hadn't realized that she'd been, like, pining for Jonathan the whole time or whatever. He guessed he wouldn't want to see them together *now*, even now. Anyway it wasn't really the same thing.

Bill was still ignoring him and Steve felt like a little kid. “Bill, are you seriously not going to talk to me?”

Billy raised his eyebrows and continued to not talk to him. It was so wonderful. He had his beer on his knee and was tapping at the neck of the glass bottle so Steve reached out and touched his arm. “Hey.”

Bill startled and almost knocked over the bottle; Miller Lite (the worst beer, probably leftover from his graduation) fizzled out onto the leg of his jeans and the couch cushion between them and they both jumped a little.

“The fuck, man!” Bill spit out. He slammed the beer bottle down onto the coffee table. “Jesus Christ. You wanna not fuckin' grab me?”

“God, I – sorry, I wasn't grabbing you.” Bill ignored him and twisted around behind himself to grab the throw blanket on the back of the couch; Steve watched him mop the beer up. “Okay. I dunno why you're not talking to me, if you're pissed off just say it so I can – “

“Said I'm not pissed.”

“Okay, but you obviously are,” Steve said. Billy scowled and didn't

answer him; he was scrubbing a palm over the knee of his jeans where his drink had spilled in this real agitated way. "Come on, man, I came over here to see you."

"Yeah, that's so fucking flattering," Bill said. "Don't put yourself out on my account."

Jesus Christ. "That's not what I mean." Everyone had been so annoying all day – Steve's dad and his coworkers and Dustin being a superfreak about everything like usual. His eyes hurt and his head hurt and this was stupid and it was *Friday*. Steve waited all week for it to be Friday so he could be with Bill; he'd been waiting all day to be with Bill.

That was so much to say and probably sounded whiny and stupid; it even sounded whiny and stupid in his head. "I meant, uh, I meant I wanted to see you. I don't wanna fight with you."

"I'm not fightin' with you."

Steve stared at him; they obviously weren't having a good time. "You shoulda got better security detail on your place if you didn't wanna see me," he pointed out. "Max and Will let me right in."

Billy made this super annoyed face that would almost be funny, probably, if he wasn't making Steve feel like total crap right now. "I do wanna see you."

"Okay, so what's your issue?"

"I don't got an issue," Bill told him. "I'm not doing shit to you."

"Okay," Steve said. "Uh, just feels like you're really mad at me and you won't say nothin', so I don't really know what to do here –"

The face that Bill was makin' got even more annoyed. He glared at the TV. "Man, why do you – why do you even want to fucking talk to her?"

Steve stared at him blankly. "Who, Nancy?" Bill turned and gave him a look that said that Steve was really stupid. "Uh, I don't – she's my –"

“She's your what?”

“She's my – nothing,” Steve said like a moron. “We're, we're friends.”

Billy snorted. “Yeah? Since when.”

God, it was going to be the same stupid frickin' conversation about Nancy that they always had. “Come on, you – we've always been friends.”

Billy stared at him like he was stupid again, then he turned back to the TV. “Okay,” he said flatly.

“What?” Steve asked him.

Bill looked at the TV for so long that Steve was pretty sure he wasn't even going to answer. Then he said, “You're not friends, dumbass. You guys went out for a year and then she fucked some other guy. That don't make you friends.” Steve stared at him and Billy turned his head to look back at him. He raised his eyebrows in this real annoying way. “What, you forget that?”

“Uh, thanks, no, I didn't forget that,” Steve said shortly. “Look, it's not like – you don't know everything, okay?”

“Yeah, I think I know a little, had to fuckin' hear it from you for about six months.”

“Okay, uh, that really doesn't have anything to do with – “

“I just don't know why you wanna keep talkin' to somebody like that, you get so fuckin' stupid over this girl – “

“No, I don't,” Steve interrupted him. “I haven't even – I wasn't doing anything, I just talked to her in a fucking restaurant! I'm not – ”

“Okay.”

“I wouldn't do anything with her, I don't care about her like that!” Steve told him. He didn't really know how many times he was supposed to say it or what he was supposed to say. He'd thought that he'd made it pretty clear that he only cared about Billy; he thought

he'd been doing pretty good lately. They'd done so much stuff together. Not just sex stuff but also sex stuff. He'd just had Bill's dick halfway down his throat two nights ago; he didn't understand why Bill was acting like Steve wanted to jump on Nancy or whatever. Obviously he didn't want that. "I don't really know what else you want me to say – "

Bill laughed and kind of scoffed at him; he kicked his boots up onto the coffee table. "Yeah, it's not really you I'm worried about."

That was nice. "Uh, what does that mean?"

"What do you fuckin' think it means?"

"I, I don't know." Bill could not seriously think that there was still something between him and Nancy; he had to know by now that Steve was totally crazy about him. "What, are you like *jealous* or something?"

Definitely the wrong thing to say; Bill glared at him. "No, I'm not fucking jealous."

"Okay, uh, 'cause I mean, I'm not – she wouldn't try anything – "

Bill stared at him. "Are you kidding me? She just fuckin' did a month ago!"

"Yeah, but that was before – " He wasn't really sure if he should mention again that he'd told Nancy about Bill and him; they hadn't really talked about that. "Look, she knows I'm with you, she doesn't even want – she's not gonna try and get back with me or anything, Nancy's not like that."

Bill just stared at him some more. He licked his lips and stared at Steve. Then he turned back to the TV. "You hear yourself right now?"

"What?"

"You're sittin' here fucking defending her to me right now, man."

Jesus H. "I'm, I'm not doing that!" Steve said. "I'm just trying to tell you – "

“Oh, yeah, tell me, tell me all about Nancy, I love hearin' it.”

“Oh, my god, okay,” Steve muttered. “Look, I'm sor – I don't know what you want me to say. I just ran into her for like five minutes, do you not want me to talk to her at all? It's not like I, I planned to go out and see her, I can't, like, actually predict where she's gonna be or anyth – “

Bill slumped down on the couch and crossed his arm; he looked like a sulky kid. He pushed his jaw out for a second. “Yeah, that's what I want.”

Steve stopped talking; he'd been in the middle of a great big run-on sentence. “You – what?”

“You just asked me what I want, I want you to not fuckin' talk to her.”

“Uh, okay,” Steve said. “But that's not – what, are you serious?”

“Guess so.”

Steve stared at him; he guessed he didn't really get it. “Yeah, that's not – “

“What?”

“I – “ He didn't really know what to say. “Okay, but I, I can't actually do that. It's not – “

“Why not?” Bill asked him.

“Uh, because I just think you're being kind of ridiculous,” Steve told him. “I was just talking to her, I don't – it's not a big deal, it's not like I like her like that anymore or anything – “

“So why the fuck do you wanna talk to her so bad?”

“I *don't*, it's – “

“So what's the fucking problem?”

"I – " Steve tried and then stopped. "You know, you can't actually tell me who I can and can't talk to, that's not how this works."

Billy laughed at him. He had the *You're Bullshit* smile on his face again. "Okay, how's it work?"

Jesus Christ it was so annoying. "I don't know. I don't know why you're so pissed off at me, I didn't *do* anything!"

"I just don't fucking know what you wanna talk to somebody like that, all she does is make you feel like shit, she fuckin' makes you feel bad."

"No she doesn't." Steve stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, my god, Stevie." Bill rubbed his face. "You can't be this fuckin' stupid."

"Thanks, I'm not – "

"All you fuckin' do is run after this chick that don't give a shit about you, I seen you do this for like half a fuckin' year," Bill told him. "I'm getting real fucking tired of it, all right?"

"Okay, I don't do that," Steve told him. He hadn't cared about Nancy like that in – God, he didn't know how long. He hadn't been running around after Nancy; he'd been running around after *Billy* for months. Apparently Bill didn't remember that.

"Yeah, you do."

"No I don't."

"Yeah you do."

"Uh, no, I – "

"Yeah, you fuckin' do!" Bill said; apparently they were going to do this all night. "Jesus, you're so fuckin' stupid for this girl, bet if she called you right now you'd go right over there."

"Jesus, no, I wouldn't." Maybe unless there was a monster or

something. "That's not fair, it's not like that."

"Oh yeah? What's it like?"

"I don't know!" Steve snapped; he didn't even know what they were arguing about. "Look, you – I just know her really well, I've known her for a long time –"

"That's so fuckin' adorable, really –"

"Okay, I've known her longer than I've known *you*," Steve pointed out.

Billy stared at him. "Yeah, thanks, I know that."

"I'm just – I'm just saying! I've known – you weren't here for – we've just, you know, you can't just ask me to stop talkin' to her, we've been through a lot of stuff together."

"Oh yeah, have you?" Bill asked him. "Got her friend killed, right?"

"Screw you," Steve said.

"S'what you told me."

"That's really great, thanks for throwing that in my face." Steve slumped back against the couch too.

"I don't fucking do that, you do that to yourself."

Steve had no clue what the hell he was talking about. "I have no clue what the hell you're talking about," he said.

"Okay," Billy said. "Look, okay, she don't like you like that anymore, that's real nice, maybe she just wants to hook up with you again –"

"She doesn't want to do that," Steve said loudly –

"– I just don't get why you wanna talk to somebody who makes you run around after her like a goddamn dog or something –"

It was like Bill was just saying the same shit over and over again. "I don't fucking do that!" Steve told him; he was not exactly being

quiet. "I haven't even talked to her for like a goddamn month, I've been with you!"

"Okay. So stop talkin' to her."

"Yeah, I can't – I'm not gonna do that."

Bill stared at him like it was a challenge. "Why not?" He sounded like he was making fun of him.

"Because it's not – " Steve didn't even know what to say; Bill was being totally stupid about everything. "I'm not just gonna not talk to somebody because you say so. And you know what, that's not fair – if your, if your old girlfriend or whatever showed up here, you would be *all over* her, so don't – "

"That's not the same fucking thing," Bill told him, really he was practically snarling. "Don't talk about her."

"Why not? You talk shit about Nancy all the time, I don't understand why you're so jealous over somebody I haven't even been with in – "

Billy's eyes flashed; in the light of the TV they were really blue and also really scary. "I'm not fucking jealous!"

"Okay, well, you're being a total asshole to me right now and I didn't even do anything – "

"Yeah, because I fucking love you, you stupid shithead!" Bill spit out; Steve stared at him. "It pisses me the fuck off to see you acting like an idiot about this chick, you always fucking do this!"

"I – "

"I don't fucking get you, man," Billy continued. "Are you actually retarded or something?"

"Uh, thank you, no, I'm not – "

"She fucking *cheated* on you! She didn't want shit to do with you for a whole year, she was running around with some other guy while you followed her around! You came over to my place on New Years Day

fuckin' crying about her – “

Jesus Christ. “I wasn't *crying!*” He definitely hadn't cried. And okay maybe he'd been kind of messed up about Nancy but he'd gone over there to see Billy. “I didn't go to your place to talk about her, I wanted to see y – ”

“Whatever. I listened to you bitch about her for six fuckin' months, I ain't doing that shit no more, I mean it.”

Steve didn't really know how to answer; Bill had said a lot of stuff. “So what is that, like, an ultimatum or something?”

“Big word for you.”

“Screw you,” Steve said. “What, are you serious, you want me to chose or something, like you or her?”

“No, 'cause I already fuckin' know who you'd pick.”

Steve stared at him. “That's not – okay, that's not even fair, and that's not true, I wouldn't pick her.”

Bill laughed and slumped down on the couch even more; his face crumpled up for a second and then he just looked pissed again. He kicked at the leg of the coffee table. “Maybe I meant me, asshole.”

Oh. Shit. Steve felt really horrible. “That's not, that's not what I meant.”

Bill kicked at the coffee table again. “Whatever.”

“I don't know why the fuck you're acting like this, do you know you're acting like a huge baby?” Steve asked; he really wanted to know.

Billy made a face at him like a huge baby. “Wah.”

“That's cute, that's great,” Steve told him.

“Thanks,” Bill said. Steve rolled his eyes.

“That's not fair for you to say all this shit to me, if, uh, if Tracey or whatever fuckin' came around here and was – “

“I said don't fucking talk about her.”

“Why not?” Steve asked him. Bill got so stupid about her too and he acted like it wasn't the same goddamn thing. He was way worse than Steve, actually; Max had told him before that Bill wouldn't even let her talk about Tracey, and they'd been friends or whatever. “”Why can't I talk about her? You know if she called you up or something, you'd be – “

“You don't wanna start this shit with me right now, man.”

Steve scratched the side of his neck. “Huh, okay. Yeah, I guess she wouldn't really wanna talk to you anyway, right?”

Billy's whole face changed. It was like this blank mask went up and he just stared at Steve. “Fuck you,” he spit out.

“I'm just saying. That's, that's what you told me before.”

It was definitely the wrong thing to say and Steve felt like total shit right away. He didn't really even have time to feel sorry because Bill leaned forward and grabbed him in two seconds; he nearly knocked Steve's glasses off his face. He had his hand clenched around Steve's shirt collar and had Steve pressed against the back of the couch with his whole body. “That is really nice, man, what else you got?”

“I – “ Billy looked like he really wanted to slug him and he was way too close. Steve had to physically stop himself from cringing; it took a lot. “I don't got anything else, I didn't mean that.”

“Fuck you,” Bill said again. His hand twisted in Steve's shirt and he shoved Steve roughly against the back of the couch again; Steve just stared at him. “You don't know shit, you fuckin' retard. You know, you act like you're so fucking – “ he stopped real abruptly. He just stared at Steve, pressed too-close with his hand in a fist around the collar of Steve's shirt.

“What?”

Bill let him go and pushed him against the couch, still staring. "Nothing," he said flatly. He moved over and sat back down next to Steve, then crossed his arms again. He was sitting really still.

"What?" Steve was surprised his throat still worked. It felt really dry, like he'd rubbed it with sandpaper. "What were you gonna say?"

"Nothing," Bill said again. His voice sounded weird. Steve was too annoyed to try and figure out what it sounded like. "You know what, I don't feel like doin' this with you."

"That's great, what do you wanna do then?"

"I don't wanna do shit," Bill told him. "I don't feel like fighting with you over this crap, it's the same shit you do all the time."

"I'm not even fucking doing anything!" Steve told him; maybe he was kinda yelling really. "You're the one who's acting totally nuts, all I did was come over here!"

"Okay." Now Bill was just sitting and looking at the TV again with no expression on his face. It was like he'd shut off or something. "So I guess you shouldn't have came over here."

"Okay, what?" Steve asked; Bill didn't answer him. "I mean, what does that even mean?"

Billy didn't say anything for a long moment. Steve wondered if he was about to go off doing his not-talking thing some more; he was about to ask again when Bill finally spoke. "It means I want you to leave."

"You – really?" Steve stared. Bill didn't answer him, again for a long time. "What, you really want me to go?"

"Yeah, I'm tired of listenin' to you."

"Oh, that's really great, that's real mature – "

"Fuck you," Bill said dismissively. "I don't feel like – I don't wanna do this shit, I don't feel like actin' like my fuckin' dad every time I get pissed off, so why don't you just go."

“Oh, wow, my god, that is so noble,” Steve told him. “You know what, you're really acting like – “

“I don't feel like fightin' with you,” Bill said in this really strained voice; it made Steve take pause.

Steve stared at him. He stood up and got off the couch, then stared at him some more. “I – don't wanna fight either.” He felt really awful; he *didn't* want to fight. He didn't even know what the hell they were arguing about. Nancy like usual. It was so dumb. Steve was pretty sure he was being a total dick to Bill and he wasn't sure why. “Look, I'm sorry, all right? I didn't mean that stuff just now.”

“Whatever.” Bill still seemed to be trying his hardest to not look at him. “Just go home, I'll call you on Sunday or something.”

“Really?” Steve asked him. “What, now we can't see each other all weekend?”

“Jesus. Don't be so fucking dramatic, Harrington.” Bill rolled his eyes which was better than the expressionless zombie thing he'd been doing. “You're ticked off at me, just go home. S'like better this way, right?”

Steve's throat still felt really dry; it sounded scratchy when he spoke, too. “Okay, how is that better?” he managed.

“I dunno.”

He was just standing by the couch in front of Bill and he felt like a dope. He puts his hands in his pants pockets. “Are you actually kicking me out?”

“Guess so.”

“You – “ Steve didn't really know what to say. He felt really horrible and he kept saying the wrong thing. He should just stop saying stuff, he thought, and then immediately said more stuff. “Okay, are you – what, are we breaking up or whatever?”

Billy looked up at him; his fancy eyebrows went down. “I thought we were just having a fucking fight.”

“Uh, okay.” That was still really bad but at least Bill wasn't dumping him again.

“Why? You wanna break up with me?”

“No, I don't,” Steve said right away. Bill's eyebrows were still doing their weird thing and he looked unhappy and it was making Steve feel pretty terrible. He still felt real irritated and kind of overwhelmed but also terrible – he didn't want to feel any of those things. This was *not* how he wanted his Friday to go. “I just don't know why we're doin' this whole thing, I don't really know what else you want me to – “

“What you wanna do, fuckin' yell at me some more?”

“I didn't yell at you,” Steve told him. At least he didn't think he had.

“Yeah you did,” Bill said like a kid.

“Uh, okay, I'm not gonna argue with you about – “

“Look, the fuck you want me to say?” Bill asked him. “You don't wanna hear it anyway.” He reached over and picked up his beer bottle again. He held it in his hands and just looked at it. One corner of his mouth turned down. “Still early, maybe you and *Nancy* can catch a movie.”

Jesus Christ. “Dude, you are such a *fucking* asshole,” Steve told him; Billy raised his eyebrows like Steve'd said something really funny but otherwise didn't react. “Okay, whatever.” He didn't know what he was supposed to do. “That's, that's fine. Whatever. I'll leave.”

“Okay.”

Steve just stood there for another few seconds like a total moron with Bill not looking at him. He definitely didn't look like he was going to change his mind, and Steve guessed he didn't really want him to. Then there really wasn't anything for him to do but take his keys and go, so he did.

He was pretty sure he managed not to slam the door. When he got back out on the street, it had finally started to rain, which felt about

right.

Notes for the Chapter:

A long day in the life of Steve, lol. Sorry to end this on a not-so-happy note; of course I am going to fix everything. I don't like leaving things on a 'cliffhanger' (I don't really consider this to be a cliffhanger, because love is real and all, but, y'know).' As usual everything I write gets too long. This part would have been like 40k again and that's overwhelming and I'd never post it. The next part will actually mostly be fluff.

Thanks for reading, if you're still reading! :)

12. Chapter Twelve

Summary for the Chapter:

“Uh, what are you guys doing here?” Steve said again.

“We ... wanted to see how you were.” Mike was still making one of his weird faces.

“That's a lie, *I* wanted to see how you were, Mike wanted to watch *Star Wars*,” Dustin said. He lumbered over to the couch and smacked at Steve's legs. “Move please, I want to sit down.”

“I can't move, I played a sport today,” Steve told him; Dust sat on his ankles.

Chapter Twelve

Steve was still pissed off when he got home and he spent most of Friday night being pissed off. It was still pretty early by the time he got back, just past seven, and he walked on up his driveway and back into the house, pissed off and getting rained on. He fed Luke and Leia, pissed off (though no longer getting rained on). He made a crappy dinner by himself and felt pissed off.

He probably didn't have to actually be alone, he figured, but he was too ticked off to make a bunch of calls and try to find someone else to hang out with. His old friends from school were around now and always drinking, but he figured he'd see them tomorrow anyway. He'd had plans already tonight that had gotten all screwed up; he didn't want to make new ones.

Steve's mom came home at nine and he watched a movie with her, pissed off. He drank some wine with her, pissed off. He didn't really feel like hangin' out with his mom of all people on a Friday night, but he guessed it was kind of rare lately that he got to do that. Maybe it

was lame but he didn't really mind. If Dustin could hang out with his mom every Friday night and watch a movie with her then Steve could do that too with his own mom. Watchin' the movie did not help him feel any less pissed off, though.

"All right, I need to know, why do you have that sour expression on your face?" Mom asked him midway through *Trading Places* (Steve's pick). She poked at his forehead between his eyebrows which was super annoying. "You've been angry all night."

"Uh, quit swatting me, please." He pushed her hand away. "I'm not angry."

"Did I do something to you already?" Mom questioned him. "It's only been two hours."

"Uh, no," Steve said, and then felt annoyed at himself. Billy had said before that he said 'Uh' too much. He felt like saying 'Uh' eighty times now; he could make a recording of it and put it under Bill's door to piss him off. "You didn't do anything."

Mom got her look on her face that said he was being very funny, this little smile that barely turned the corners of her mouth up. "Are you fighting with Dustin? I left him here with a sandwich earlier."

"Nope. Not fighting with Dustin." Steve tried to make his face look normal and apparently less sour.

"I thought you would be over at Billy's, I didn't really expect you to come home for me."

"Yeah, Bill's being a jerk to me right now," Steve told her. He didn't really mean to but he did tell his mom stuff sometimes. Used to. Still did. She was always at work now but they'd been close when he was younger, Steve guessed, until all the dumb shit with Nancy and her friend and the lab had happened and Mom hadn't wanted him to hang around with Nancy. Of course they were close; his mom was his mom. He wished he could tell her more stuff.

"Oh really?" Mom was next to him on the couch with her wine (a lot of wine, since they were watching an Eddie Murphy movie) and still

in her fancy office clothes. She sat up a little. "And what did he do?"

It was nice or whatever that Mom had said *What did he do* instead of *What did you do*. It felt like people had been accusing Steve of stuff all day, and he hadn't even done anything. Even Dust had said he wasn't picking sides, but he'd still acted like Steve shouldn't talk to Nance at all or something, just because Billy was a crazy psycho. Which he totally was – Steve could see this now. Somehow over the last couple months he'd forgotten that Billy was in fact a crazy psycho; it was probably all the sex they'd been having. If they hadn't gotten into a dumb fight they'd probably be having all the sex right now. It was past nine.

It was probably not a very good idea to be thinking about sex with Billy, Steve thought, when he was sittin' in the living room watching an Eddie Murphy movie with his mom, and she was staring at him. Anyway he still felt pissed off. Too pissed off to think about sex, which did actually happen sometimes, and he *really* didn't want to talk about Billy with his mom. Like at all. Maybe he would have before but everything was too weird now. Anything he could tell her felt like too much, especially when it all seemed screwed up right now.

He shouldn't have opened his mouth; she was still staring at him. "I, uh, I don't know. I don't really feel like talkin' about it."

Mom got a different look on her face; Steve didn't know what it was. She wasn't smiling and she wasn't frowning and she didn't look mad. "You can if you want."

"I know that. Thanks," he added. He mostly knew. "It's just stupid shit, don't worry about it."

"Don't say – "

"Stuff, stupid stuff."

Now she just looked like he was being funny again. "Well, I love stupid stuff."

"Yeah, I know that, I seen those soap operas you have taped," Steve

told her; she swatted at him.

“I watch those for the comedy.”

“Oh, sure. I know that too.”

Mom smiled at him and he felt less annoyed for a couple seconds. She put her head on his shoulder; he could smell her perfume. Steve had been taller than his mom since he'd been like fourteen but sometimes it still felt strange to be bigger than her. “I miss you, I'm glad that you came home,” Mom told him. “Are you still going to Chicago on Wednesday? I'll stay home for the dogs.”

“Dustin said he could come over.”

“Surprise,” Mom said; Steve laughed. “So are you going?”

“Yeah, I guess I'm gonna go. How come, uh, Dad doesn't like girls to wear pants in the office?”

“Well, because your father is old fashioned, and a bit of a pervert, I'd say,” Mom told him.

She wasn't exactly wrong. Even so: “Could you, you maybe not start about him right now?”

“I'm not starting anything. You asked me a question and I answered it.” Mom looked like he was being super funny so Steve made a face at her; she put her hand in his hair. “Did he come into the office today?”

“Yeah, of course he did, it's Friday.” Back to feeling annoyed.

“Hmm,” Mom said. “Okay, I am not starting anything, I'm really not, I promise. Tell me about your day, what did you do? Not stupid stuff.”

Steve thought about it: it felt like today had been about a million years, and the morning seemed forever ago. He wished he'd stayed in the office talkin' to Linda and Joanne for longer. Then he'd have missed Nancy and missed the whole mess.

Well he didn't have to tell his mom about the whole mess. He talked to her for a while.

That night he laid in bed for a long time, watching his ceiling fan spin away in the dark. It was pretty late but as usual when he was by himself sleep seemed hard to come by.

Now that he wasn't talking to his mom or watching *Trading Places* (it hadn't cheered him up like he'd wanted it to), he kept thinking about Billy, even though he'd told himself he wasn't going to think about Billy. He kept thinking about all the dumb crappy stuff they'd said to each other. He spent a while being mad about that; it was keeping him awake. He still didn't even know what they were fighting about.

First off Bill made no sense like usual. Nothing about Billy ever made sense – the way he talked sometimes or the music he listened to sometimes or the way he painted his frickin' nails sometimes – and it confused Steve. Usually Steve didn't mind being confused but tonight he definitely minded.

Bill had already been mad before Steve had even shown up but he'd obviously gotten even angrier when Steve'd asked him if he was jealous about Nancy or something. Maybe that hadn't been the best thing to ask, but how else were they supposed to talk about stuff? It made no sense for Billy to be jealous; he was like the most confident person Steve had ever met. He definitely didn't need to be jealous and that was why everything was so stupid. He'd acted like Steve was always running after Nancy which wasn't true. Well, anymore.

He'd also said a couple times that Nancy made Steve feel *bad* or something which made no sense too. Steve knew that he'd been a total dope about her before but that had been a while ago. She didn't make him feel bad anymore; she didn't make him feel anything really. *Billy* was the one who made him feel bad, well he had tonight at any rate.

Bill always said a bunch of stuff he didn't mean when he got mad and this time hadn't been any different. Being mad was like his default setting or something. That didn't mean it was okay. Whenever he got

ticked off it was like he needed to make you feel as hurt as he'd ever felt or something. Steve thought that he knew Billy pretty well so he knew that was what Bill had been trying to do; that still didn't make it okay. Billy knew Steve pretty well too so he knew exactly what kinda shit to say. He'd called Steve stupid a bunch of times and had been really shitty. That'd been the thing that had made him real upset, Steve guessed.

Obviously he knew that that was a thing people did, guys or whatever. Even the Monster Squad laughed and teased each other and called each other stupid idiots or retards all the time. It shouldn't even be a big deal. It was just that Steve guessed stuff like that really hurt his feelings and Bill knew that. He'd said that shit for a reason.

Steve knew that he wasn't really smart or anything. He knew he was pretty dumb. He was okay with some stuff but he'd never done real great in school or anything. It shouldn't really matter but it mattered. A lot of the time he didn't feel smart like other people were smart. He hadn't been in the advanced English class at Hawkins High like Bill and Nancy had been. He hadn't even been in the *regular* English class until senior year, and that was only because Nance had kicked his butt and made him study with her for like six months the year before. Once or twice she'd said stuff like *I just don't understand how you don't know this already* and that had made him feel really shitty.

There was probably something actually wrong with him, like maybe he needed to take an IQ test or something. His mom had even wanted him to take some kinda reading test back when he'd been like ten or eleven and he'd started having trouble with spelling and with history. Dad had said he was just lazy though so Steve had just tried harder.

He'd always tried real hard but school stuff always seemed so tough for him. He couldn't just slack off all the time and then make an A on a test like Bill could or like Carol or even Tommy had been able to. Nance was smart too but she worked crazy hard at school and she studied a lot. That was like actual torture for Steve; it was like he couldn't pay attention or something. The Monster Squad had all their little jokes that Steve was dumb but sometimes it didn't really feel like a joke. Maybe Bill really did think he was stupid too. There wasn't really anything special about him.

He laid around and thought about that for a while and felt, well, felt stupid. He guessed he was feeling pretty sorry for himself. By about one AM he'd stopped feeling pissed off and had started to just feel really shitty and sorry for himself. That wasn't really what he should be thinking about. He kept thinking about a million different things.

Billy had been a total dick to him tonight but Steve kind of thought now that ... maybe he hadn't handled himself so great either. He felt pretty dumb about that too; he'd had a crappy day and he'd already been annoyed. He didn't really understand what it was that Bill had wanted from him. Now that it was one in the morning and he was by himself, he guessed he could admit that he'd kind of been a dick too.

It had been really dumb to think that Billy wouldn't have cared about him talking to Nancy. Not that he *should* care, or that something was going on or whatever. And he definitely didn't need to try and tell Steve who he could talk to. But Bill had always been weird about Nancy and Steve knew that.

He guessed he *had* spent a while moaning and bitching about her to Bill when they'd first started hangin' out with each other, but Bill had talked about his old girlfriend too. Not in the same way because the same stuff hadn't happened. Billy had told Steve about what had happened with him and Tracey and Steve was pretty sure that he was the only one Bill had told about it.

He'd told Steve that he'd knocked his old girlfriend up and how awful he'd been to her about it. How his dad had beat his ass twice (once when he'd found out and then a second time after Bill's girlfriend had lost her baby) and then moved them across the country. He'd never got to say sorry or anything. Steve knew how bad Bill felt about all that shit. He hadn't needed to tell Steve about it and it had felt like a big deal when he had. It'd been crappy to throw it back in his face, even if Bill had been saying shit to him too. That had been really shitty; that was *not* in the Good Boyfriend Steve handbook.

It was just that Steve didn't even know how they'd gotten to that point, saying crappy shit to each other. He had thought they'd been doing really great lately, but maybe not if Bill just got freaked out right away over him talking to Nancy for two seconds.

It wasn't like he'd known that Bill had, like, had a *thing* for him or whatever last fall; Bill had been bummed out about his old girlfriend too. If Steve had known that before he would have maybe tried to not talk about Nancy so much. And okay maybe he'd had some *thoughts* about Billy before (okay maybe a lot of *thoughts*, actually maybe *Thoughts* with a capital letter because you capitalized important shit), but he hadn't thought that Billy would just grab him and kiss him one night. He hadn't expected that he would like it so much either.

But Bill had and Steve had and now here they were. It wasn't like a couple months ago when they'd been sneaking around and half the time Steve still hadn't even known what was going on. They were actually together now and people knew about them, well, some people. Didn't that mean something? He hadn't thought that Billy would get so ticked off just seeing him and Nance together.

The thing was that Steve hadn't really been thinkin' about how Billy would feel at all, he guessed. That was crappy. He remembered how Bill had looked in the car earlier today and how bad it'd made him feel right away, like he'd gotten caught or something. He hadn't done anything wrong, but if he'd felt like he'd gotten caught or something, then maybe he had. He didn't know. He didn't wanna feel like he'd done something wrong, that was the thing.

He guessed by the time he'd got to Bill's place he'd been feeling pretty guilty or something. Max being a little shit to him and all hadn't helped it. Steve knew that he got too stupid about stuff too. He *still* didn't really think he needed to say sorry for talking to Nancy but he could have said *sorry for making you feel bad*. He realized that he hadn't really said sorry at all, he guessed, not until they'd already said a bunch of shit and then Bill had kicked him out. It was dumb but sometimes if you cared about someone you had to just say sorry. It made Steve feel really shitty; he almost got in his car and went back over there.

He didn't go back over, though. First off it was like two in the morning now, second of all Bill was probably definitely still pissed at him. Steve guessed that maybe he was kind of a coward or something; he didn't feel like yellin' anymore. He still felt ticked off and he felt kind of confused and hurt too.

He realized too that Billy had said *I love you* again and he felt like a great big asshole. Bill had said *Because I fuckin' love you* but he'd also called Steve a fucking retard like two seconds later which wasn't great. Steve guessed that that had been all he'd really heard at the time, Bill calling him stupid.

It was, like, a big deal and Steve wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel. Usually when people said 'I love you' they wanted you to say it back to them; that was like the ideal or the goal or whatever. Not the *goal* but it was nice to say it and have somebody say it back. What was he supposed to do, go back over to Bill's place and say *I'm sorry* and say *I love you*. He didn't know if he could just go and do that. What if he said *I love you* and then realized later he didn't mean it or something? That would be really horrible; he absolutely didn't want to do that.

Or what if he said it and Bill took it back or something, or said that he hadn't meant it that way (Steve didn't know what way he could have meant it but whatever). Billy said a lot of shit he didn't mean when he got angry so he might have not meant that either.

It was shitty but sometimes people said *I love you* when they didn't really mean it. Sometimes they said it to you one day and then the next day they got really drunk and told you that your whole relationship was bullshit and you didn't know what to do about it. Sometimes they told you they loved you and then they slept with somebody else as soon as you got into a stupid fight. Sometimes they told you they loved you and then ten days later they were goin' out with some other guy. Sometimes they – okay Steve suddenly got why Bill had said that Nancy made him feel bad. Shit. He stared at the ceiling fan some more.

Anyway that didn't really matter; Nancy didn't really matter right now. They'd had the whole big dumb fight about her but she didn't matter. Maybe Steve'd been acting like she mattered or something. He guessed he could sulk about that later; apparently he was going to have a whole weekend alone to sulk about shit.

He didn't know if he loved Billy or not – he'd never really thought about it like that. He didn't know if it was because they were both guys or what but that shouldn't matter. He knew that he cared about

Bill and that he wanted to be with him or whatever. He wanted to be around Bill all the time – well, when they weren't yellin' at each other, anyway (or sometimes when they were, but only if it was about sports) – and he thought about Bill a whole bunch. He definitely liked sleeping with him and kissing him and stayin' over at his place. He missed Billy when he wasn't around; actually he missed him right now even though he was still mad at him.

He didn't know if that meant he actually, like, loved Bill or not, though. That made him feel pretty shitty too but everything was so confusing. Steve had told himself that he wasn't going to get so stupid about somebody again. They hadn't even been together that long.

Billy could be so hard to be around sometimes, even when Steve wanted to be around him. He hadn't even been the easiest person to just be friends with. Steve was pretty sure that if he could have picked somebody to be nuts about, he would have picked someone a lot easier to be with than Billy Hargrove. But you didn't get to pick who you were nuts about, it just happened.

He just didn't know; how were you supposed to know. It wasn't like in the movies or on a TV show where there was romantic music and slow-motion and cue cards or whatever. How were you supposed to know.

It made Steve feel kinda nervous or something actually. It felt like way too much. Obviously he wanted Bill to love him or whatever and it felt unfair that he didn't know if he could say it back. Maybe he should just say it back anyway but that would be really shitty if he wasn't sure.

He remembered back to when all the shit had been going down in June and Max had been goin' off on him in the middle of the street. She'd said that Billy had wanted to say that he loved Steve and Steve remembered how he'd wanted to laugh. He'd wanted to laugh and he'd thought *no, no way*. He remembered thinking that the only thing Bill loved was his car, and even that was a big maybe.

That made him feel bad now too because of course Billy was, like, a normal frickin' person (well, mostly normal) with normal frickin'

emotions and of course he could love somebody. Except that Steve just didn't think that he could go from thinking that way to deciding that he was in love with Bill in like a month. It just felt like a lot.

Now that was a new thing to feel like crap about. Maybe it wasn't even a big thing. He just wasn't sure and he really needed to be sure — it wouldn't be fair otherwise. It just felt really important that he be sure before he said something; it wouldn't be right. Well if Bill ever stopped bein' pissed off at him and decided to talk to him again.

Everything was still too dumb; Steve punched his pillow a couple times and finally fell asleep at past three, trying to figure out how he felt. He'd left his blinds open and when he woke up a couple hours later the grey morning light was too-bright in his eyes. It didn't give him any answers either, and it was still raining.

The weekend took forever to go by. On Saturday Steve got himself up early to meet everyone for hockey like usual; it was still a downpour outside but everyone played until they were tired and gross and soaking wet anyway.

Afterwards a couple of the guys wanted to go see the new stupid *Jaws* movie over at the Marion Central Mall so Steve said he'd go too (Billy was seein' a movie today after all —so could Steve). He went back home to get changed and then headed over to Alex's place; Mrs. Kiersnowski had always liked him and she still made the best brownies (Steve ate three and Alex bitched in his dramatic way that they were missing the previews).

The movie was pretty dumb but it still made Steve feel kinda glad he'd never been to the ocean or whatever. It was Saturday so the mall was pretty crowded — Steve got a Slush Puppie at the food court which meant the day wasn't a total waste.

He sat with Alex in the smoker's section out by the lobby while Kyle went with whatshisname to go and buy some new tapes for his

girlfriend. The mall'd just opened up a Sam Goody and it was some kind of big deal. Steve hadn't brought any money for tapes, though.

Steve didn't have any smokes so Alex gave him one. Alex smoked Salem Blacks which Tommy had always said were girl cigarettes; Steve thought they were okay. He sat smoking and looking at the orange wall of the lobby while Alex went on talkin' about the hockey play that he'd totally messed up earlier. The laughing groups of people coming and going through the tall sliding-glass doors that lead out to the parking lot made Steve feel weird and lonely.

"Hey, Steve, you doing all right?" Alex asked him, out of nowhere Steve thought.

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

"Uh, you've just been talkin' way less than usual today, man." Steve turned to look at him and Alex grinned.

He looked like the same guy that Steve'd known for about five years now. Alex was real skinny, skinnier than Steve even, and he'd never gotten very tall. His brown hair was super straight and he kept it in a ponytail to piss off his dad; everybody always joked that Alex had looked the same since the ninth grade. Alex joked back that actually he'd looked the same since fifth.

Anyway Steve felt kinda surprised that somebody who wasn't, like, Bill or Dustin had noticed anything about how much he talked or didn't talk. Alex was being cool with him and all, had been cool, but somehow Steve didn't think that the middle of the Marion Central Mall was the best place to tell his friend that he'd been going out with a guy for four months, or that he was currently in a big stupid fight with him. He also didn't feel like making up some big lie and talkin' about Bill like he was a girl or something. He just said, "Thought I'd give you guys a break for once."

"Noted and appreciated," Alex said; he made himself laugh and then coughed out some cigarette smoke. "No, but seriously, you're doing good and all? You're never around when I call."

Steve felt weird. When all the shit had first gone down a couple years

ago and he and Tommy had stopped talkin', Alex had picked Steve to still hang around with. Steve hadn't really cared either way back then: he hadn't really cared about Alex or Tommy or Carol or who was friends with who. There had been, like, *alien monsters*, and government agents lyin' to his mom and threatening him not to say shit, and then he'd spent forever trying to get Nancy to go out with him again, almost two months. He hadn't really been too bothered about who still wanted to be his friend at the time.

He'd known Alex for a while but they'd never been super close friends or anything. He remembered how way back in sophomore year he and Tommy'd decided that Alex wasn't really cool enough to hang out with them. They'd always made fun of him for hangin' out with his mom and for wearing stupid jerseys with random numbers on 'em (not really to his face but sometimes Tommy did it to his face); that seemed like really immature or whatever now. It was pretty shitty – for some reason it made Steve get the weird lonely feeling again real bad. That stuff hadn't really mattered in high school and it mattered even less like the second you graduated.

He felt weird – he felt bad. He felt like he should say sorry or somethin'. “Yeah, man. Sorry, I've just been busy with work.”

“I hear that.” Alex gave him another cigarette.

“Uh, what about you, how's the shop with your dad?”

“Pretty shitty, you know, how's the office with yours?” Alex's old man owned a sporting-goods store out in Two Forks. Now that he was out of school for the summer, Alex was stuck workin' the counter with his dad. Aside from Bill and himself, Alex was pretty much the only other guy Steve knew who really had a job full-time.

“Pretty shitty,” Steve told him too. He was luckier than Alex, he said – his old man wasn't in the office breathin' down his neck every single day. They shared some woes and then Alex changed the topic.

“Hey, I almost forget, I saw Carol last week, she was at the grocery store with her mom,” Alex told him.

“Yeah, that was probably her aunt,” Steve said right away, almost

automatically, even though he didn't really feel like talking about Carol. Carol's mom had left her and her dad when Carol'd been like twelve so Steve was pretty sure there was no way she'd be at the grocery store with her mom. She'd been real upset about it when it'd happened; she'd stayed home from school for almost two weeks and Steve had brought her their homework assignments (not that they'd done them). That'd been back when he'd had his big crush on her. "Uh, did you talk to her or what?"

"For like five minutes. She dyed her hair again," Alex told Steve like this was vital information. "I guess she and Tommy really split up last month, we were talkin' shit on him."

Steve felt surprised. "What, really? I didn't know that."

"Yeah, she must of finally got tired of his bullshit."

"I guess so," Steve said. He sat back against the bench. He didn't really know what to think about all that – Carol and Tommy had been goin' together since like the seventh grade; they'd fought a lot but never really split up. Steve'd always figured they'd get hitched or something.

"She didn't tell me nothing about it, we just talked for a couple minutes. Oh, she asked me about you, too."

Steve felt surprised again, then immediately suspicious. "Uh, really? What'd she say?"

"I don't know, she just asked if I'd seen you around. I said yeah, we play hockey together every weekend. I told her she should come play with us, she flipped me off." Alex grinned again and it made Steve laugh.

"Yeah, that sounds about right." Aside from being Tommy's girlfriend the other thing Carol was known for was being real bad at sports (but great at beer pong).

"She told me she's goin' to secretary school in the fall. She said to tell you if you wanted – "

Kyle and Andrew (Steve'd finally remembered his name) were coming

back over with their shopping bags. “Hey faggots, let's go!” Kyle boomed out; he was really lovely like that. “I gotta babysit my brother tonight.”

“Isn't his brother like fourteen?” Alex asked Steve.

“So what? *Star Wars* is on TV tonight,” Kyle said loudly like a nerd.

Actually *Star Wars* sounded pretty okay; Steve guessed he had his plans for the night.

By the time he got back to his big empty house it was past seven again. Steve instantly felt bummed out and bored, even though he'd been out all day and *Return of the Jedi* was going to be on UPN in an hour. He let Luke and Leia back outside to enjoy the call of the wild (or at least the backyard) and went around flickin' lights on in the house.

Steve's mom was still around but he guessed she was upstairs in her office or her bedroom. She'd gone food shopping and had left him a bunch of chips on the counter and one of her dumb notes that she'd signed with her lipstick.

Jesus H she was so embarrassing; the worst part was that Steve knew she'd gotten a huge kick out of kissin' the paper or whatever. He rolled his eyes and put the groceries away, then stood around in the kitchen, eating chips and looking through the screen door at Luke and Leia bounding around outside on the wet dark grass. He started thinking his Steve-thoughts like he always did when he was alone.

He thought about Carol for a couple minutes – that was weird because he hadn't really thought about her in a long time. He kept thinking about her cryin' her eyes out in her bedroom back when they'd been kids and her mom had left, and how he'd just sat around with her like a big dope.

Carol had stopped talking to him too after the bullshit with Nancy but she'd never really gone out of her way to heckle him or piss him off like Tommy had. He'd even talked to her for a couple minutes at

graduation last year but it definitely hadn't been the same; Steve figured he'd probably really hurt her feelings. He'd felt kind of bad about it but not bad enough to ever say sorry or ask how she was.

The thing was that Tommy'd always been Steve's best friend – well, before he'd gotten together with Nance anyway – but he guessed that when he really thought about it (he *had* thought about it a couple times), Carol had really been a better friend to him. She'd never teased him for bein' in retardo English at school and she was kinda dumb with math like Bill was. Steve was pretty okay at math so they'd always helped each other. She'd used to come over to his house on Sunday mornings and watch the ten o'clock cartoons with him; Steve's mom would make them breakfast. That'd all been a really long time ago though.

He hoped that she was okay or whatever. He didn't really have any bad feelings about her anymore. Sometimes he actually kind of missed her, sometimes a lot. She'd been a totally different kinda girl than Nancy was – more like Max or her friend Beverly, Steve guessed. He'd always told her a lot of stuff before, and then it was like he didn't have somebody to tell stuff. Aside from Nancy and Billy, Carol had been the only person he'd ever told about how screwed up his parents really were. She'd used to talk to him about her parents too. She'd used to tell him about every dumb fight she and Tommy ever got in, and Steve had probably told her way too much about every girl he'd liked.

He kind of missed having that now, somebody he could talk to about all that kinda shit – not that he had any *girls* that he liked right now or whatever. It was different with Dustin because he was so much younger and was just now startin' to date and all. Plus he was still pretty weird about Bill sometimes and Steve just ... couldn't tell him a bunch of stuff.

Sometimes it made things easier when you could tell people stuff. Steve bet that if he was still friends with Carol she'd be a huge pervert and she'd wanna know all about him and Bill; she'd probably think that two guys together was super hot or something (it was). That would be fun. He'd wished before that he had somebody to tell about Bill: not Dust who was weird about it, or his coworker who was way older, or, like, *Nancy* who it was weird with because they'd used

to go out. Somebody who he could just tell about it and they'd be happy for him.

That probably wasn't going to happen, though – well, him being friends with Carol again, anyway. First of all, he had no clue if she still hated his guts. She might not wanna punch him out in the middle of Main Street, like Tommy apparently did, but Steve figured he probably wasn't exactly her favorite person. Second of all, he never even saw her anymore to talk to her. He did wonder why she'd asked about him though.

Steve let the dogs back inside since it was still raining so hard; as always it was chaos trying to dry them off so they wouldn't leave muddy footprints all over. He hid the horrible embarrassing note from his mom and took his chips into the den. He turned the TV on, muted it, and then put the radio on too. The volume was too loud and made him wince – some song he didn't know was just ending, a whine of guitar fading out.

“And that was 'Billy' by the Vapors playing on our Saturday Night Fever hour here on POWER 99, the only station that gives you what you *really need*,” the radio DJ announced like a corny asshole. “Since we got a such good thing goin’ on, let's keep going with our names theme — here's Phil Collins with 'Don't Lose My Number.’”

“Are you *serious*? Screw you,” Steve told the radio. He flopped down on the couch and kicked his sneakers off. He still didn't change the station though. Phil Collins was still Phil Collins, even if he was singin' about a dude named Billy. What the hell was that song even about.

He listened to the radio for a while. They were doing requests since it was the weekend and the radio announcer kept on reading out stupid dedications and corny bullshit.

“This one goes out to Darlene in Hamilton, here's hoping you stay dry on this rainy night, Darlene, maybe there's somebody out there who wants to *hold you now*,” the announcer said. He played 'Hold Me Now' by the Thompson Twins; it wasn't even frickin' clever or anything. Steve wondered how much he got paid.

It was funny how you never really noticed that practically every song out there was a love song unless you were, like, totally bummed out over somebody and miserable. Cutting Crew (Steve only knew all the band names because the DJ kept sayin' them all) sang 'I Just Died In Your Arms' and then Blondie sang 'Heart of Glass.' Bread sang that old love song that Steve's mom liked. Heart came on playing their new single 'Alone' again. The drums totally kicked ass.

“Here's a song for sad dipstick Steve Harrington, yeah you with the chips on your shirt, Steve did not even brush his teeth today, ladies and gentleman,” Steve imagined the DJ sayin'. Stupid asshole. Also Steve was totally gonna brush his teeth before he went to bed. It was the weekend and he could not be judged.

Steve ate his chips; the dogs were his best friends right now since he had food. “’Til now I always got by on my own, I never really cared until I met you,” he serenaded Luke, who was chewin' away on his tail. “And now it chills me to the bone, how do I get you alone?”

Luke wagged his chewed-up tail. Steve gave him a potato chip.

Listening to the sappy music on the radio made him feel all melancholy (not an SAT word, but should have been) or something. He couldn't help thinking about Bill, what with all the stupid love songs that kept playing. Steve wished that he could, like, just turn his brain off and go out and have fun and not think about all the dumb stuff that had happened over the last day. He really wished he could do that but he guessed he didn't know how to be that kind of person anymore.

He felt all, well, *alone*. He laid on the couch with his chips and thought about Billy. He wondered if Bill was still ticked off at him or if he just felt like shit too. He kept thinking about the way Bill had looked when they'd been arguing and the way he'd looked when he'd said *I don't feel like acting like my dad* and Steve had said *That is so noble* back to him. He thought about the way Bill had looked when Steve had called him a dramatic baby and a fucking asshole and the way he'd said *Maybe I meant me*. He guessed he'd wanted to make Billy feel bad too. They just didn't do it in the same ways.

He wondered if Bill *did* feel bad or if he missed Steve at all or if he'd

woken up with the weird lonely-empty feeling too. He wondered if Bill was laying around on his couch listening to crappy music and thinking about him too. Probably not though. More than likely Billy was out somewhere gettin' loaded and not thinking about Steve at all.

Maybe he should call him or something. It was stupid and could feel himself doing the obsessive thing but it couldn't be helped; that was his Steve-thing.

Billy had said that he'd call on Sunday but Steve didn't know if he'd actually call on Sunday – Bill forgot about shit like that a lot, and he hardly ever called Steve anyway. He might not call, and Steve was a moron for sitting around and waiting for it. He could actually do something. He could just call.

It was stupid that they'd got in a fight and now they couldn't hang out all weekend. It wasn't like back in high school, when Steve'd get to hang out with Nance and eat lunch with her during the week if he hadn't seen her on Saturday or Sunday. The weekend was, like, his *time* with Bill, even if there were dumb kiddie brats hangin' around and annoying them for half of it.

He should probably call him; it just felt like he should call him. It felt like it was too much time.

Maybe Billy was really still ticked off at him. Sometimes Billy did crazy stuff when he was ticked off – okay he did crazy stuff a lot. Maybe he was thinking now that it wasn't really worth it or something; maybe that was why he'd told Steve to go home. He might – it was just – maybe he'd change his mind about Steve, if Steve gave him too much time. Or maybe he'd decide he didn't really love Steve like he'd said after all or something.

Steve should probably call. When he and Nancy had gotten into that big fight at the party last Halloween, he'd been really mad and he hadn't called her or anything. He'd waited too long even though he hadn't thought it'd been too long. He'd gone over with his dumb flowers like two days later (and gotten intercepted by Dustin anyway) but she'd already been gone with Jonathan. If Nancy could do that then why not Billy.

Bill could be out with somebody too since he thought Steve was so fuckin' retarded apparently. He could be out at the roller rink with somebody, or maybe he'd take 'em to the lake in his car like he and Steve had done before, or maybe he'd –

Okay that was really shitty. Steve mentally smacked himself; he almost smacked himself for real. He knew that Billy wouldn't really do that to him. Like Bill wouldn't actually cheat on him or something just because they'd got into a dumb fight, at least Steve was pretty sure. He was kind of sure. It was just that, you know, it had happened before. It didn't really feel like it mattered that it'd been with somebody else, or that it'd been a long time ago. He wasn't really special or something. Billy could get whoever he wanted; he could decide he wanted someone better.

Steve felt all worked up and he was making himself mad. He'd told himself a million times that he wasn't gonna let himself get like this again. Everything felt like too much. It'd almost been easier back when he and Bill had just been hooking up and Steve hadn't known what was going on. Now they were actually together and he had to, like, worry about stuff.

He'd kept saying the wrong things to Billy last night. He didn't know how he hadn't realized he wasn't saying what he actually meant. Dust had said *Steve, you've had like a million girlfriends, how do you not know this!* but apparently, as usual, Steve knew jack shit (also it wasn't a million girlfriends, it was like three, and then a couple girls he'd just hooked up with). Billy wasn't a girl though and Steve didn't talk to him in the same way he'd talk to a girlfriend. He definitely didn't talk to him the same way he talked to Nancy. He wasn't sure why that was.

He'd just kept saying the wrong thing. Billy had even said before that he and Steve hadn't been together then, but he'd still seen Steve and Nancy all over each other about six weeks ago. Maybe Steve hadn't needed to tell him he was being a huge baby about it. And when he'd said *Nancy's not like that* he hadn't meant it like they weren't going to hook up again just because she was oh-so-virtuous or something. Bill had said that Steve was defending her but that wasn't what Steve had meant. The whole thing was just funny to him because Nance hadn't really wanted shit to do with him in like a year. Obviously Bill didn't

think it was funny.

It wasn't like he would've felt great if he'd seen Billy with – like, some other guy or something. Obviously they were allowed to have friends and shit. Steve knew he got too dumb about stuff; he'd just spent the last twenty minutes getting too dumb about stuff. He didn't even like Bill hangin' out with *Jonathan* and – okay, yeah, he was *not* gonna get into why he felt like that right now. But he bet if he got real crazy and told Bill he didn't want him to talk to somebody, Bill would just say, 'Okay, whatever.'

Okay Steve was calling; the phone was already in his hand somehow. He felt like a huge dumb asshole listening to it ring.

The phone rang and rang — Bill had never set up his answering machine because Susan had gotten real annoyed at him and Max the other week and had said two huge burps wasn't a good *I'm not here* message. It rang like ten times and then Steve hung up. He didn't know if he felt relieved or what: he didn't know what he would've said anyway. He put the phone back on the end table.

He watched the TV on mute and listened to the radio for a while longer and felt sorry for himself. He almost fell asleep even though it was barely eight o'clock; it was getting dark in the room. Then there was a weird sound out by the front of the house and the dogs started barking like maniacs and ran out into the hallway. Steve startled and almost dropped his chips everywhere.

Two people were talking by the front door and Steve felt really freaked out. "I told you he wasn't home!" somebody said.

"No, his car's here!" somebody else said; it was Dustin. Something clattered out in the kitchen.

"Oh, my god, why are you touching shit, we just broke in here!"

"Uh, we didn't break in, our friend lives here!"

Oh. Okay. It was just the Monster Squad. Steve calmed himself down. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Steve! Where are you!" Dust yelled back like an idiot. He appeared

in the doorway to the den a second later. Mike was trailing behind him with his hands in his jeans pockets and a major stress-face on.

The kids walked on into the room. Dust was wearing the same baggy hoodie he'd been wearin' all summer and Mike had a crazy striped shirt on and his pants up to his stomach like a grandpa. Steve was pretty sure if he had to look at the crazy striped shirt in direct light he'd pass out or at least make a shitty comment.

Dust stopped walking and Mike bumped into him. "Oh my god, look at him laying there, it's worse than I thought!" Dust lisped.

"Oh, fuck you," Steve said. He looked fine, well mostly. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"Your mom told me where you put the spare key yesterday, why'd you move it to the pool house?" Dust asked him; Steve wisely didn't answer.

"Uh, what are you guys doing here?" he said again.

"We ... wanted to see how you were." Mike was still making one of his weird faces.

"That's a lie, *I* wanted to see how you were, Mike wanted to watch *Star Wars*," Dustin said. He lumbered over to the couch and smacked at Steve's legs. "Move please, I want to sit down."

"I can't move, I played a sport today," Steve told him; Dust sat on his ankles. "Ah! Get off me!"

They struggled for a few moments and finally Steve gave in and sat up. Dustin plopped down next to him and Mike stood there awkwardly staring at them. After a moment he went and sat down in the big armchair close to the TV. He hadn't been over at Steve's house a bunch of times like Dustin had and he looked weirdly out of place.

"Can I have your chips?" Dustin asked. Steve handed them over, a little reluctantly, and Dust started crunching away. "I knew you would be home by yourself in the dark, what happened with Billy?"

Jesus H. He didn't feel like talkin' about Billy. "What do you think?"

Dustin chewed his chips wisely. "Told you he'd flip out."

"Yeah, okay. You were right and everything's my fault," Steve told him like a grumpy baby.

"I didn't say that, I just said he'd flip out. Did you say sorry for eating with Nancy?"

"No, I didn't say sorry, I shouldn't have to frickin' say sorry," Steve snapped, then felt like an even bigger grumpy baby. "What are you guys doing here, I don't feel like talkin' about this."

"It's Saturday night, where else would I be," Dust said loyally.

"I don't know, Becca's house?"

"Uh, no, she understands that we need our time together."

Dustin was so frickin' weird. "Did you guys make up or whatever?"

"Yeah, she thought I was playing a prank on her, we talked for like two hours last night," Dust told him. "She said I should come over here too. I *knew* you'd be here by yourself because you weren't at Billy's."

Steve felt suspicious and annoyed right away again. "Man, why'd you go over to Bill's place?"

"I had business there, don't worry about it," Dustin told him like a creepy nutcase; Mike rolled his eyes. "Billy asked me about you, you know."

"Oh yeah? What'd he say?"

"I don't know, he just asked me about you!"

"Why were you at Bill's place?" Steve asked him again.

"Relax, I barely saw him, he just came out of his room for two seconds to scream at Max. She set the fire alarm off trying to make

bacon in the oven, everybody was yelling at each other!"

"Okay, but what'd – " Huh. "Uh, why was she doing that?"

"I don't know, but I ate it all," Dust informed him.

"That's, that's great, I'm happy for you."

Dust grinned at him and ate more chips. "Where's your remote?" he asked. He looked up at the clock on the wall. "Okay, *Jedi* starts at eight-thirty, you may talk about Billy for nine minutes if you want. Mike, set your watch."

"Really? Uh, okay," Mike said. He started tapping away at his calculator watch. Jesus H.

"Yeah, thanks, I'm all right," Steve said dryly. "I just called him anyway, he didn't even pick up."

"Billy's not home, he took El and Max to the mall," Dust told him.

"Oh." That was so great. Steve felt all weird and ticked off even though he'd just been at the mall today too for like three hours. Bill was probably scoping out all the hot guys he could get there and thinking to himself what a great big idiot Steve was.

He really needed to stop; he turned and looked over at Mike. "How come you didn't go with 'em?"

Mike made another stress-face; this one looked like he'd sucked a sour lime into his mouth. "Why would I?"

"Uh, I don't know, because El's your girlfriend."

"Yeah, and she's with *Max* and *Billy*," Mike told him like he was dumb. "They'd all just make fun of me all night! I'd rather be *here*, or, like, the *junkyard*!"

"Je-sus Christ, Mike, that's really sweet, thank you," Steve told him. "You've got like a way with words, you should write a book."

Mike almost smiled at him. "We wanted to see if you were okay. *And*

watch *Star Wars*,” he added. “The TV in my basement broke and my mom’s watching the *Murder, She Wrote* marathon upstairs.”

“Oh my god, don’t tell Steve about that, he’s going to put it on now!” Dust cried dramatically.

“Fuck you,” Steve said again. *One time* he’d said *one thing* about *one episode* to Dust’s mom. That’d led into a big discussion but whatever. What was wrong with *Murder, She Wrote*?

Anyway, it was nice that the kids had come over, even if they probably felt sorry for him. It kind of felt like he and Bill were a divorced couple or something – Steve guessed in the divorce he’d get Mike and Dust, and Bill would get the girls. That made Bill the mom so ha-ha. Steve wondered if El was gonna throw him around the hallway again.

Dustin was staring at him in an annoying way. “Okay, seven minutes now, give me the details,” he said. “Did you guys really get in a fight?”

Steve rubbed at his jaw. “What, you didn’t hear about it?”

“No one told me anything, I was eating! What did Billy say, did he go totally nuts?”

“I don’t know.” Like usual he felt bad talkin’ about Bill when he wasn’t around.

“Steve! Come on!”

“Don’t make him talk about it if he doesn’t want to!” Mike really *did* look like he’d rather be at the junkyard.

Dust ignored him. “Steve!”

He could go on all night like this, and they’d definitely miss *Star Wars*. “I don’t know,” Steve said again. “Yeah, he said a bunch of crazy shit, he doesn’t want me to talk to Nancy anymore.”

“Why do you want to talk to her so much anyway?” Dust asked him, after a weird pause in which he and Mike turned and looked at each

other.

Steve stared at him. "What do you mean, she's my friend."

Mike made a face; he was mostly looking at the TV. "Okay," he said like Steve had said something dumb again (he sounded like that a lot).

"Uh, what? What does that mean?"

"Nothing, I don't know."

"Mike's just on Billy's side because El wouldn't let him talk to Max for forever!" Dust lisped.

"Shut up, no she didn't!"

"Huh, okay, then why'd you tell her she couldn't be in the – "

"That was like a year ago! Max is a psycho anyway!"

"Yeah, but she's like the coolest one of us," Dust told him. He wasn't exactly wrong, Steve figured.

"I can't just not talk to Nancy, I'm not gonna stop talkin' to someone because, uh, somebody I'm dating doesn't like it."

Mike made a new face; this one was even weirder. "Okay," he said again.

"What, you think I should?"

"No, I think that's *stupid*, and *exactly* what a freak like Billy would tell you," Mike told him compassionately; as always he said Bill's name like it was a cuss word. "But Nancy's my sister, and she's not even *cool*!"

Steve wondered if that meant he was cool, or if Bill was. "She's all right," he told Mike.

"Nancy's fine, you just don't even act like a real person around her anymore."

Steve stared at him. "What? Yes I do."

"Okay," Mike said a third time.

"He's kind of right," Dust put in.

"Yeah, I don't really know what you guys are talking about."

Mike looked pretty uncomfortable Steve guessed. He also looked like a little dork sitting in the huge arm chair, kind of like the grumpiest Mr. Rogers or something. "Look, Nancy's my sister, but – uh, you're my friend, too, right? I mean, like, *now*, anyway." His nose scrunched up. "Kind of."

Huh. "Yeah, sure."

"You never act like yourself around her, you're *way* more fun when she's not around," Mike said. Steve was gonna tear up; Mike had said he was fun. "You just follow her around all the time asking her if she's, like, okay, or if she wants you to do something for her."

Huh, again. "I don't do that."

"She should be asking you if *you're* okay, Steve, she cheated on you!" Dustin told him.

"Oh, thanks, weirdly I remember that."

"It was pretty screwed up." That was Mike.

"A lot of stuff was screwed up," Steve told him.

"I don't know. I just don't get it." Mike was looking at the TV again. "*Not* that I get you and *Billy* either," he added. "Nancy's not your girlfriend anymore. You don't –"

"No shit, I know that," Steve interrupted loudly; Mike made a terrible stress-face at him.

"Okay, well, I *have* to hang around her because she's my sister, you don't!"

“Yeah, we are way more fun than her,” Dust put in. Again, he wasn't exactly wrong (sorry Nancy).

“Yeah, we are. So what's your issue with her?” Mike asked Steve.

They were makin' him feel super weird. “I don't have an issue with her,” Steve said; the kids stared at him. “What, that shit was a long time ago, am I supposed to be pissed off at her forever?” That didn't do anything.

“No. I don't know.” Mike shrugged.

Steve lapsed into silence for a couple seconds and Dust took the remote from him. He switched the TV station to UPN and turned the volume up, not too loud.

Steve thought his Steve-thoughts. He felt so dumb talkin' to the kids about this; maybe he shouldn't feel so dumb. They had came over here and all. He still had two minutes left to talk before the movie started. “So do you guys think – uh, like, what, you think she makes me feel bad or something?”

Mike and Dustin both turned and stared at him; Dust had chips falling out of his mouth. “Yes, definitively,” Dust said right away.

“That's literally what we were *just* talking about,” Mike said.

“Do you not have ears or something?”

Jesus H they were such frickin' brats. Steve leaned back against the couch cushions. “Okay, thanks, I know what we were talking about, I was asking a, a specified question.”

“Steve! Do you not remember the entirety of 1986?” Dust asked him. “You were majorly unhappy!”

“Uh, because she – “

“Yeah, you refused to go in my house for eight months but were also somehow *always* at my house! It was pathetic!”

“You almost didn't go to Prom! You still wanted to get back with

her!”

“No I didn’t!” Steve snapped. He *hadn’t* wanted to get back with Nancy, not anymore. He’d stopped wanting to get back with her after only a couple weeks. It was just ... okay it was dumb. He hadn’t wanted to get back with her, but he guessed he’d kind of wanted her to, like, want him back, or see she’d made a mistake. Obviously that hadn’t happened. “Look, this is dumb, I can’t just not talk to her.”

“I’m not saying you can’t, that’s your prerogative,” Dust said; Steve had to pretend he knew what that word meant. “Sorry I acted like you couldn’t yesterday, I just did not want to get my ass kicked. But what are you going to do?”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Steve said. He still didn’t know. He was also pretty much done talking about it, he decided. He nodded over at the TV. “Movie’s starting.”

“Do you have more food?” Dust asked.

So much for Mom’s groceries. “Second cabinet in the kitchen,” Steve told him; Dustin took off.

Steve was done talking about it but he wasn’t really done thinking about it. He thought about it for most of the movie actually.

He guessed that maybe talkin’ to Nancy lately wasn’t exactly something that made him feel great. The kids had been right and Bill had been right; Steve just hadn’t wanted to hear it. Not that she was nasty to him or that she’d ever said a bunch of really mean shit to him like Billy had. Well, not in the same way. It’d been a long time since they’d been together as a couple and it was weird to really think about it now.

They way they’d broken up had been shitty and Steve knew that. He’d already spent his time being pissed off at her. He’d always thought that maybe he’d just been a shitty boyfriend; he’d always wanted to act like things were totally normal and he hadn’t listened to what she’d wanted.

He hadn’t listened to her so much that she’d gotten drunk at a party

he'd made her go to and had told him he was bullshit and that they'd killed her friend. Steve had never thought about it like that before, that they'd *killed Barbara*. Nancy had said it to him though so that meant she'd thought it, maybe still thought it. He always wondered how long she'd been sitting on that; it had kept him up on a lot of nights. He wouldn't know how long she'd thought it since he had never wanted to talk about all the crazy stuff that had happened. That definitely didn't make him feel great about himself.

That hadn't been fair of him. But it hadn't been fair of her to act like – like he didn't matter or something. He'd told her it was okay but it wasn't okay. It was crazy how fast she'd gotten over him and it made him feel bad. He'd always tried really hard to be the kind of person he'd thought she wanted, without actually asking her what she wanted. After they'd broken up and then she'd gotten with Jonathan right away he'd thought maybe he shouldn't have had to try so hard.

You don't even act like a real person around her. Steve didn't think that was true. Maybe he'd kind of changed himself for Nancy, but it hadn't been a bad thing, and it hadn't just been for her.

At first, it hadn't been *any* kind of thing. At first, Nance had just been a girl who he'd thought was cute and he'd wanted to go out with a couple times – he hadn't even thought they'd sleep together. Then all the crazy shit had gone down right after that and her friend had gone missing and Steve had, like, had to decide what kinda person he wanted to be or some corny crap like that. And then it just felt like everything had become so much more.

He didn't wanna be the kind of person he'd been before he'd started goin' out with Nancy: the kind of guy who just made fun of his friends and who hooked up with girls but didn't really date them. The kind of guy who didn't care about anything important and who just hung out drinkin' with people like Tommy all the time.

But Nancy'd never really asked him to do all that stuff. She'd never really asked him for anything: she'd never asked him to change how he acted, or to buy her stuff, or to take her places. She hadn't asked him to stop talking to his friends for her, or to not go out for the basketball team so they could spend more time together, or to get into fights with his mom over her. He'd done all that without her

asking him to, because he'd wanted to make her happy.

Billy never really asked him to do anything either, Steve realized. It was a weird thing to realize. He thought he'd done a lot of stuff for Billy but it wasn't like he expected anything back. At least he didn't think so. Or maybe he did want stuff back and that was selfish. He did get stuff back.

He'd gotten Bill those stupid flowers before and he tried to take Bill out to places that he'd like or where they could be together without causin' a riot. He did dumb stuff all the time like get Bill the gross menthol cigarettes he liked, or buy groceries for him and Max if he saw they needed something.

But Billy had never asked him to do that shit. He never asked Steve for anything really; when they'd been *just friends* he barely even fucking asked Steve if he wanted to hang out.

Once he'd asked *Can you just talk to me*; just thinking about that made Steve feel like cryin' or something and he wanted to go and be with Bill. The kids could stay here and watch *Star Wars* and eat all his goddamn food.

Can you just talk to me. That was the only thing he'd ever really asked, aside from askin' if he could drive Steve's car once, after he'd just spent two weeks fixing it up and giving Steve rides everywhere. And then last night he'd said *That's what I want, I want you to not talk to her* which was crazy; Steve still thought it was crazy. How the hell was he supposed to do that? It seemed like such a big thing to ask.

He couldn't just *not talk* to Nancy. It was – he couldn't just – he didn't know. Okay, Tommy was a piece of shit now but he hadn't always been a piece of shit: he'd been Steve's best friend; Carol had been his friend too and he'd picked Nancy over them. At the time it hadn't mattered but then it'd kind of started to matter. He couldn't just *not talk* to Nancy. They'd gone out for almost a year, and she'd been – she'd been his best friend when they'd been going out. He'd told her so much stuff. He'd ditched his two best friends for her. How was he supposed to act like that didn't matter?

He'd stopped talkin' to Tommy and to Carol, and he'd spent like two

months trying to get Nance to give him another shot. She hadn't asked him to do that. It just felt like – if they weren't friends anymore, or if they didn't talk anymore, then that would make all the stuff that had happened when they were together not matter. And he'd just be that same person that he was.

Except that wasn't exactly true, he guessed. If everything hadn't happened with him breakin' up with Nancy, he never would have became friends with Dustin or anything. Dust wouldn't be here right now eating all his food and making Wookie noises at the TV. Actually he probably never would have started hangin' out with Bill either if he hadn't been so miserable. Then Bill would just still be some crazy guy who'd beat him up one night. Maybe he should thank Nancy or something.

Everything was too confusing and he didn't know what to do – he didn't know what he was supposed to do. It felt like he was always trying to do the right thing for somebody but he didn't really know what the right thing was anymore.

He just didn't know what to do; how was he supposed to know. He watched the whole movie with the kids and he still didn't know what to do. It was a pretty long night.

Star Wars ended late and then everyone sat around for a while talking about what their favorite parts had been because that's what you did after you watched *Star Wars*. Steve gave the kids a ride home, and then by the time he got back to his house it was past one. It didn't take him too long to fall asleep for once – he guessed he'd, like, actually mentally exhausted himself thinkin' about Billy and thinkin' about Nancy.

Sunday went by too slowly but also too quickly at the same time. As a kid Steve hadn't liked Sundays too much because they meant he had to get up early for school the next day; now they bummed him out because he had to get up early for work the next day.

His mom was still home which was kinda strange. Usually she'd be at Aunt Mary's, Steve guessed, or maybe she'd been at home more and he just hadn't noticed.

She came downstairs at a little before noon when Steve was sittin' and reading the newspaper at the big counter in the kitchen. She made fun of his pajamas for a while like she hadn't probably bought them and then made him go and get dressed; she said she had errands to run and that he could drive her.

Steve foresaw himself spending a lot of time in a lot of different department stores today. "Why do you need me to do that, can't you just drive yourself?" he asked her. He was busy wallowing; he was booked up until at least 6pm.

He thought maybe he'd get smacked but Mom just leaned her elbows on the counter and pulled his coffee cup away from him. "Hey, come on." She ignored him. "Ma."

Mom ignored him some more; she put more sugar in his coffee and started drinking it. Steve glared at her. "Really?"

"The only good thing about being a woman is getting to be chauffeured around by a man, I've said this before," Mom told him; she was too hilarious. "Why do you think I had a son?"

"That's not really, uh, feminist or whatever," Steve told her.

"I'm not a feminist, I'm a pragmatist." Mom had her smile on her face like Steve was being real funny again. "Can you go get dressed, please? And wash your face. I don't have gas money for you, either."

Jesus H. Steve stared at her drinkin' his coffee. He got up and went to go and shower and get dressed so he wouldn't have to ask her what a pragmatist was. Sounded like a bug or something.

Shopping with his mom wasn't that bad even though it really did end up being a million department stores; he kind of felt like her personal assistant or something. How many bags did she think he could carry (the answer was eight). She was havin' her big summer party for her family next weekend and she said she wanted to buy presents for all

the great-aunts for surviving another year.

“Yeah, I don't really see why that has to be celebrated,” Steve said.

“What? You don't want to hear more stories from Aunt Elizabeth about those polite homosexuals that live next door to her?” Mom asked him all fake-shocked; Aunt Elizabeth was like the oldest one. She always brought her stupid fluffy white cat when she came to visit and it was this big ordeal. She tortured Steve the whole time making him keep the dogs away from the thing. It wasn't even friendly (Bill's cat was way better). “I got caught on the phone with her last week for fifty-three minutes, you know they're building a pool.”

“That's great for them,” Steve said; Mom laughed at him. “Did she really say *homosexual*?”

“I told her to call them bachelors.”

Huh. Anyway, Steve didn't actually want to talk about his great-aunt's gay neighbors with his mom. “Can you pick something already?”

Back at home Mom made herself a salad for dinner that Steve wasn't touching and went upstairs with her new book to read. Steve guessed she'd had enough of him too; they'd been out for like four hours.

It was only six o'clock — Steve caught the end of the baseball game and went outside with the dogs for a while; then he swam in the pool since he hadn't swam in the pool like all summer. He could still do a hundred laps which was good he guessed. Then he went inside and ate two bowls of cereal which probably canceled out like half of them. It was getting dark outside already.

At a quarter-past eight the phone started ringing. Steve eyed it and chewed his cereal; he wasn't gonna let himself get all crazy, jumping for the phone every five minutes. Sunday was like telemarketer day: two people had called earlier tryin' to get magazine subscriptions.

The phone rang and rang; Steve ate his cereal. His mom's dorky answering-machine message played and the recorder beeped. A long second of static fuzzed out over the machine, like someone'd forgotten to hang up, then Bill's voice filled the room. “Hey. Steve.

It's me.” There was another long line of static and Steve stared at the phone like a dummy. “Uh, it's Billy,” Bill said unnecessarily.

He sounded really awkward – Steve didn't think that Bill'd ever left him a message before. “Pick up if you're there.” The line fuzzed over again. “Uh, just call me back – ” Bill said and then Steve caught the phone; he nearly knocked his cereal bowl over (just nearly, though – the dogs looked disappointed).

“Hey, hi,” he said into the phone, a little breathlessly since he'd almost just choked on his Cheerios.

There was more silence and Steve wondered if he'd accidentally disconnected or something. “Screenin' your calls?” Bill asked him.

“I was eating cereal.” Great, he already sounded like a fucking moron.

“I called you earlier, nobody picked up.”

“I was out with my mom,” Steve told him.

“Okay,” Billy said. He was quiet for a couple seconds. “You still pissed at me?”

“Uh, no. I'm not mad. You still pissed at me?”

“Nah, I stopped bein' mad on like Friday,” Billy muttered.

Somehow Steve kept himself from screaming *THEN WHY DIDN'T YOU FUCKING CALL ME, ASSHOLE?* That wasn't in the Good Boyfriend Steve handbook either. He probably would have been not-so-great to talk to on Friday night, anyway. “Okay,” he said too.

Another couple seconds of silence; they were so good at the talking thing. “Look, I'm ... uh, really sorry, man,” Bill told him in this stilted voice.

“Yeah, me too.”

“I, uh ... ” he trailed off. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean all that shit I said to you.”

“Me either.”

“Thought about you like all weekend.”

“Uh, me too,” Steve said again.

Bill was quiet for awhile. “I just ... “ he said and stopped. “Can we talk or somethin’?”

“I, I dunno. I mean, yeah, I guess we should.”

“Okay,” Billy said again. “C'n I come over and see you?”

“Uh. Yeah. Sure,” Steve said; he felt kind of surprised and he didn't know why he felt surprised. “Yeah, you can – do you want me to come over there, or I could – ”

“I can come over,” Bill interrupted him. He still sounded weird.

“Okay.”

“You ain't busy?”

Steve wanted to laugh at how not-busy he was, had been all weekend. “Yeah, I'm not, uh, doing anything.” He was saying 'uh' too much again.

“Okay,” Bill said. There was another couple seconds of the weird silence. “Gimme like fifteen minutes, I can come over.”

“Okay. Sure. I guess – ”

“Bye,” Bill said and hung up.

Sometimes he was so charming that Steve could barely handle it. He stared at the phone in his hand for a couple seconds and then placed it back down on the receiver.

Fifteen minutes was actually a really short time when you'd been bein' a slob all weekend. Steve put his cereal bowl and his mom's dishes from earlier away. He let the dogs back outside and then went upstairs to get changed. He definitely should have done laundry this

weekend instead of wallowing and eating chips; he had to put his pants for work the next day on. All his good t-shirts were still at Bill's place.

He was glad his mom had bugged him and made him take a shower earlier; his face felt greasy from being in the pool though. His nose was so big, it collected so much grease. He splashed his face in the bathroom sink a couple times and then brushed his teeth since he'd just ate a bunch of cereal. He glared at himself in the mirror for a couple seconds and then jammed his big dumb glasses on his big dumb face. He guessed he should actually be able to see Bill if they were gonna talk or something. He didn't know if –

The doorbell was ringing already and Steve had to rush downstairs before Luke and Leia started barkin' their heads off in the backyard. It was stupid but he hoped he looked all right or whatever; he hadn't really had time to prepare. Okay. He wasn't going to screw up again.

When he opened the front door up, Billy was standing there with his hands in his pockets like a little kid, gettin' rained on out on the front step. “Hey.”

“Hey. What's up?”

“Nothin'.” Bill just stood there looking at him.

“Right, sorry, you can come in.”

“Okay.” Bill followed him inside and then just stood in the front hall looking at him again. Steve wondered if there was somethin' he was supposed to be doing.

“Uh, do you wanna see the dogs or something?” he asked Billy. He usually did.

Bill kind of looked like Steve was being funny. The corner of his mouth turned up. “Yeah, I'd rather see you.”

“Okay, yeah,” Steve said like a moron. “Yeah, we can – okay, uh, we can go in the living room.”

“Okay.”

They went into the living room and then just stood around in there too; Billy took his jean jacket off and held it. Steve still didn't really know what he was supposed to be doing. Everything always felt so dumb and awkward after a fight.

He picked up the remote and looked at it like a dope. He turned the TV on and muted it. "Uh, so did you see your movie?" he asked Bill.

"Oh. Yeah, it was real gross." Bill looked happy for a split-second; Steve guessed he was thinkin' about how gross it'd been. "Don't think you really woulda liked it."

"Probably not."

"Yeah."

Yep. Once again Steve didn't know what to say. Now that Billy was actually over here, he didn't really want to do this part – he wanted to skip to the part where they made up and then kissed for two hours. He felt like reaching out and grabbing him or something. "Uh, it's cool that you hung out with Will or whatever," he said.

"Is it?" Bill asked him; Steve smiled.

"I mean he probably had fun."

"Yeah, I dunno. Dunno how fun I was, I didn't really feel like goin'." Bill scratched the side of his neck. "You know Byers is goin' to some press-printin' camp tomorrow. Felt like I should, uh, take him out or something."

"Really? I didn't know that was still a thing."

"Surprise from his mom I guess. S'like a two-week gig. He likes that shit, guess it'll be good for him."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure it will be." He felt like a divorced couple or something again, standing around and talking about the kids. "Uh, you can sit down if you want."

"Oh. Right." Bill sat down on the couch so Steve sat down next to him, then he didn't know what to say again. He'd been thinkin' all

weekend about stuff he wanted to say but right now he felt like a big blank slate. It didn't feel like it had on Friday night but it still felt like there was too much space between them. He just sat there looking at Billy.

Bill looked pretty good – he looked better than usual, actually, but that was probably because Steve had missed him so much, or some corny crap like that. He must have just taken a shower because his hair was still wet; it made his eyes look bluer. He'd even actually shaved his face for once. The only thing that didn't look totally perfect was his mouth – his lower lip was kinda chapped, like he'd been chewing on it or rubbing at it a lot. He was wearing a black t-shirt with some band name or something on it and jeans that Steve had never seen before. Maybe he'd gotten, like, all fancy or something to come over here. That was a weird thought.

“Uh, did you get new clothes?” Steve asked him.

Bill looked down at himself – he looked surprised for a moment, like he didn't remember what he was wearin'. “Oh, yeah. My stylists took me out,” he said, a little sarcastically. “What, you like 'em?”

“Sure, you look great,” Steve told him.

“Thanks. Max took me to the mall.”

“Yeah, I heard, I called you last night.”

“Oh. Did ya?” Bill stared at him. He rubbed the side of his neck again. “I didn't – uh, I thought I'd give you some time or whatever. Didn't think you'd really wanna talk to me. Sorry.”

“It doesn't matter.”

“Okay,” Billy muttered. He scratched his neck some more, then dropped his hands back into his lap. He looked kind of uncomfortable on the couch, as if he'd never been in Steve's house before or something. He stared at the coffee table like it was something real interesting. “Talked to my friend in class about you,” he said in a weird voice. “She said I was bein' a real prick to you.”

Steve stared at him. “Uh. You told someone about me?”

"Yeah, I guess." Bill looked up at Steve and then back down at the coffee table. His jean jacket was still in his lap, and he was twisting away at one of the sleeves with both hands. "Do you not want me to do that?"

"No, I don't – "

"Was just this one chick, she ain't gonna say nothin' – "

"Uh, you can tell whoever you want about me," Steve interrupted him.

"Okay," Bill muttered again. He said, "I was just – " right as Steve said, "So I don't – " and they both stopped.

"Sorry, you go."

"Uh, I just – " Billy stopped again. "Sorry, I had all this shit I wanted to say to you, I dunno what I – "

"Look, I don't have to ... talk to Nancy if you don't want me to," Steve blurted out. He actually hadn't been thinkin' about that and he hadn't really thought he would actually say it or anything.

Bill stared at him blankly; his hand froze on the back of his neck. He looked at Steve for what felt like a long time. "Uh, no," he said finally.

Steve shifted on the couch and stared back at him, also blankly. "No?" he repeated.

"You, yeah, I, uh, I don't want you to do that."

"Um. Okay," Steve said slowly. That was pretty funny since they'd just been screamin' at each other about it two nights ago. Maybe Bill had actually came over here to break up with him or something. Okay. "Yeah, but the thing is, you said that – "

"Yeah, I know what I said. I didn't mean that shit," Billy told him. He sat forward on the couch and looked at Steve; they'd gotten kind of close together somehow. "Sorry. I don't really want you to do that."

"I don't – " Steve didn't know what he wanted to say. He didn't know why words were so hard right now; usually he couldn't shut the heck up. "Look, I, I wasn't really thinking about how that would make you feel, I should have been thinking about that. I was just talking to her. I don't need to do that if it makes you, uh, unhappy."

It would suck but he would do it, he guessed. Right now it felt like he'd do it – he'd been thinking about it for two days. He'd gotten so mad about Billy tryin' to tell him what to do but obviously he'd do it; he'd do whatever Billy wanted. It wasn't like he was gonna run out of the frickin' state if he saw Nancy or something (he didn't have the stamina), but he didn't know what else to do if they were just going to keep around and around like this. He certainly wasn't going to not talk to *Billy*.

Billy looked really uncomfortable. "That's ..." He rubbed his mouth. "That's not really your problem, man."

"Uh, if it makes you feel bad, it's kind of my problem," Steve told him; Billy stared at him, for a long time again.

"Yeah, that's not ... " he said finally. "Look, I, I didn't mean that shit, I didn't mean to say that stuff. I don't want you to – " he made a face. "I, I, I don't wanna do that shit, I don't wanna tell you you can't fuckin' talk to somebody. That's not – I don't wanna be like that."

Steve didn't know what to say again. "Yeah, Bill, we keep havin' this fight though, we've done this like two or three times."

"Yeah, I know that. Sorry. I know I said I'd stop."

"You're just, uh, you're makin' me feel like I'm really doing somethin' wrong here."

"Sorry. You're not."

"I don't really know what else to do about it," Steve told him. Bill was sittin' and looking at the coffee table again with his shoulders all hunched up and his jacket in his lap and it made him look small. That made Steve feel bad. He hated being the person who made Billy look like that. "What, what do you want me to do? Just tell me."

"I don't know."

"Uh, okay." He didn't want to hurt Nancy's feelings by not talking to her; he didn't know how that was gonna go. He didn't even know how much she cared. It wasn't like they had so much great shit to talk about lately, or like he'd even thought about callin' her this weekend or something – she didn't even remember where he frickin' *worked*, Steve reminded himself. He felt this weird stab of bitterness for a second, then it went away. He asked, "Look, do you really think I'd do something with her?"

"No. I don't know." Bill looked really awkward beside him; Steve had seen him enough times to know when he looked awkward. It was still kind of weird to see, though. "That's not what I ... " he stopped again. "Look, I, uh, got pissed off, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to act like I didn't – "

"Bill, you know I don't care about her, right?" Steve interrupted him. "I, I care about *you*. I didn't mean for all this shit to be a big thing, I don't want to – "

"Yeah, no, I know that," Bill cut him off too. "I know you don't think I get it but I get it. I just – "

"Uh, actually, you *really* don't get it."

"You were right, okay?" Billy told him. Somehow he was still not looking at Steve; he was so good at that. "I ain't known you for that long. I – "

Steve felt really bad again. "I didn't mean it like that – "

" – wasn't around when yous were together, I'm sure it was great, you were in love and all – "

Jesus H. "Yeah, that was two years ago, that's not how I feel anym – "

"Look, can you quit blabbing for a fuckin' minute and let me talk?" Bill asked him, real annoyed. "I don't like doin' this shit."

Yep, there was Steve's guy. "Okay, fine. I'm, I'm done. I'll stop talkin'."

"I dunno." Bill was lookin' at him in this really skeptical way and it made Steve feel kind of insulted. He could totally be quiet for a minute. "Look, I wasn't sayin' shit like I wanted to. You're right, I don't know shit about it. I just seen you the last couple months. I don't – " he stopped again for a long time.

"What?"

"I dunno," Bill said. "Guess it just makes me mad."

"What, you're kidding," Steve said dryly; Bill gave him a look.

"I don't know, man, I just seen you the last couple months, okay? I kept seein' you always tryin' to talk to this chick and it was like she wouldn't give you the time of day," Billy told him. "It made me mad, okay?"

Steve had like eighty things to say but somehow he managed to keep his mouth shut. Billy kept on talking. "I didn't fuckin' get it. Like, uh – all right, when we was at her place together on Christmas. You remember that?"

"Sure," Steve said. Most of the reason why he'd even gone to Nancy's place on Christmas was because Billy and Max had been invited too. Bill had had a great sweater on, and Mike had dared Dustin to drink a cup of vegetable oil (Dust had had the runs for like two days).

"Okay, well, I watched you *all night*, Steve. You kept sayin' all this shit to her and she wasn't even fuckin' looking at you, man. You know, I, I, I liked ya so much, and she wasn't even fuckin' looking at you. I wanted her to fuckin' look at you or something so you'd be, uh, so you'd be fuckin' happy."

Steve stared at him. The eighty things had gone away and he had no clue what to say again. He hadn't really thought that Bill had noticed him doing that shit back then – the *needy-Nancy* stuff he guessed; maybe that was what he should call it. That made him feel really stupid. "Yeah, but – I don't want that anymore." He didn't think he'd even wanted it *then*.

"I know that."

“Uh, I don't know if you do.”

“No, I know that,” Bill told him. “Know you think I'm fucking jealous, I'm not jealous. I just ...” he made another face. “Look, man, whenever I seen you talkin' to her, was like you always got real down about it. I just dunno why you kept doin' it. I ain't mean it like you can't talk to her. You can get anybody you want, don't have to be her, don't have to be me. I just think she makes you feel bad.” The corners of his mouth turned down. “Guess I do that too,” he muttered.

“Uh, well, you usually don't,” Steve said carefully. “I mean, aside from when you're calling me fuckin' retarded or whatever.”

Bill frowned and looked back at him; his eyes were really big. “I'm really sorry,” he said. “I didn't mean that shit.”

Steve wasn't so sure. “Look, I know you think I get really stupid about shit, okay? I know that I'm not, like, the smartest person or whatever – ”

Billy reached out and grabbed his arm; as usual Steve felt this jolt run through him, like an electric current that held him in place. Bill's hands were really rough, maybe that was why. “Yeah, I really didn't mean that.”

It was so hard to say stuff. It felt like his throat was closing up or something. “You act like I don't already know I'm fucking stupid, you think I don't know that I – “

“You're not stupid,” Bill told him.

“Yeah, well, uh, I don't, I don't – ” Steve's face felt really hot; Bill touched the side of his neck. “You were right, she, uh, she does make me feel bad. I act fucking stupid around her. I don't mean to do – it's like I have to keep, uh, keep checkin' on her or something, I gotta make sure she's okay. I keep, I keep doing that. It's ... it's fuckin' stupid.” He was saying too much stupid stuff; he bit his lip really hard.

“Steve. Hey.” Bill sounded like he was talkin' to a little puppy or something.

"I dunno know why I keep, uh – " it was like there was so much to say and he didn't know how to say it. He felt really worked up for no reason – he couldn't think of how to tell Bill all the stuff he'd been thinking about all weekend. "I just keep tryin' to – I feel like if I could just – "

Billy was still touching his neck; he put his hand on the side of Steve's face and tilted his jaw so that they were looking at each other. "Hey, man. Steve," he said again. "You okay?"

"Sure," Steve managed. The way that Bill was holdin' his face and lookin' at him made Steve feel really dumb, like he was a kid having a freak-out or something. Bill almost never touched him like this – it was almost too much somehow. It'd only been two days but he'd really missed Billy touching him; it felt like a relief. He hadn't really expected Billy to say any of this junk to him or for them to actually be talking like this. He guessed that he'd thought that Bill might still be mad, even though he'd said he wasn't mad.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm, it's fine."

"You're not stupid, baby," Bill told him. Their mouths were really close together; a lock of Billy's hair was touching Steve's cheek. "I'm sorry I said that. You're just too fuckin' sweet to everybody."

Jesus Christ it almost made him want to cry or something. He wasn't really sweet at all. His face felt too hot – he was probably all red and blotchy like when he got real embarrassed.

Bill calling him *baby* made him feel really dumb inside too. Nobody ever really called Steve any stuff like that aside from his mom, or old ladies like Linda at work. It definitely didn't feel the same though as that though. He put his head down against Billy's shoulder. It was like he couldn't look at him or something. "Yeah, I, I don't know."

"Sorry, okay?"

"Okay."

Bill let his face go. He started pettin' Steve's shoulder in this awkward

way; Steve guessed he was trying to do the comforting thing. They sat like that for a couple seconds. Steve knew it was only a couple seconds but it felt like a really long time; he felt really stupid. "I'm real sorry," Bill told him again. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay." Steve sat back up a little; he guessed he wasn't too red anymore. Bill's hand was still on his shoulder so he felt okay. "Thanks, I just – "

"I didn't mean that shit I said. I didn't mean any of it. I was tryin' to piss you off, I shouldn't of done that."

Well it had definitely worked. Bill had said a lot of shit to him but he'd also said – he'd said *I fuckin' love you* and Steve needed to know if he had meant *that*. That was probably really selfish or whatever. He cleared his throat. "Uh, but you said – "

"Yeah, I know what I said."

"Uh, you said that you – "

"I didn't mean it."

" – that you love me, you said that you love me, did you mean that or not?" Steve asked, way too loudly.

Bill stopped and stared at him; in two seconds he looked real embarrassed, like worse than when they'd been talkin' about his eyebrows before or something. He drew his hand away like Steve had burned him. "Guess I said that, huh."

"Yeah, that's great, did you mean it or not?"

"Sure, I meant it." Billy looked really uncomfortable again; he reached across himself and started rubbing his bad shoulder. "What, you think I just go around sayin' that shit to everybody?"

"No. I don't, I don't know."

"Yeah, what, you think I say that to the guy at the fuckin' gas station?" Bill asked him; Steve rolled his eyes. "Hey, I fuckin' love you, lemme get five dollars of premium?"

“You don't put premium in your car.”

Bill rolled his eyes too. “Do you not want me to say that or somethin’?”

“Uh,” Steve said. He was so articulate. Jesus Christ. He was kind of an asshole actually. He'd made Bill say it again and then he just said *uh* back. “No, you can say it, I guess.”

“You guess.” Bill stared at him. “Okay.”

“I, sorry, I don't know!”

“Man, I'm not good at this shit, I dunno what you want me to say.”

Steve didn't know either. “I don't want you to say anything that you don't mean.”

“Why don't you think I mean it?” Billy demanded. “What, 'cause we got in a fight?”

“No, that's not – ”

“Don't gotta say it in front of the fuckin' kids or nothin'.”

“Uh, you can say it to whoever you want,” Steve told him.

Funny enough Billy didn't look comforted by that. “I said you don't gotta say it back or whatever,” he said gruffly.

“It's just that I'm not – ”

“Yeah, that's okay.”

Steve kind of felt like a frozen statue now that Bill wasn't touching him anymore. He was getting too overwhelmed and he wasn't getting to say what he wanted again. “Can you like stop for two seconds, can you let me talk?”

Bill held his gaze for a long moment; he had his sulky look on his face, like when Steve yelled at him about locking his door or when Susan had yelled about the answering machine last week. “I guess.”

“Okay.” Well. Now, if you could believe it, Steve didn't know what to say . He guessed he needed to figure it out pretty fast. “Uh, I don't know how – I mean, I can't really say that back to you – ”

“That's okay,” Bill said again right away, like he'd been expecting it. It made Steve feel really shitty again.

“Jesus, no, that's, that's not what I mean,” he blurted out. “I just, uh – I never really thought about it like that, I didn't think you would – “

“That's okay,” Bill said again. “Guess I had more time to figure it out it than you.”

“Uh, right.” Steve didn't really know what that meant, like Bill had been in love with him since Christmas or something. That wasn't really possible. “Yeah, I just, uh, I'm sorry. I think I need a little more time.”

“Okay.”

God but he felt really bad; he should just say it back. It would almost be easier to just say it back. It was almost unbearable actually. How was he supposed to know. “I, I don't wanna tell you somethin' if I'm not sure, uh, that I mean it or not.”

“Okay,” Bill said for like the eightieth time. He was just sittin' there with his arms crossed and Steve couldn't tell if he looked hurt or disappointed or just weirded out by everything.

“Look, do you remember – when we were – uh, when we were talkin' at your place – ”

Billy gave him this real withering look. “Oh, did we talk? At my place?”

“Yeah, when we – “

“You sure?”

Bill was impossible. “Jesus, you're really – I mean that night when you called me from the hospital, Max brought us that pizza. We were talkin' about going to the lake and shit.”

“Okay, sure.”

“Do you – you remember all that stuff you said to me?”

Now he looked kind of annoyed; Steve didn't really blame him. They'd, like, talked about their *feelings* and shit. “Sure.”

“Well, I – I care about you too,” Steve told him. “You're really important to me. Uh. You're the, the only person I wanna be with. You know that.”

“Guess so.”

“It's just – uh, yeah, I need some more time.”

“Okay,” Bill said again.

“Okay?” Steve asked him. “Are we, is that okay?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Seriously? Because I don't want you to think – ”

“Man, I said it's all right.” Billy shifted on the couch; his knee bumped into the coffee table. “That's, that's, uh, that's fine.” He glanced over at Steve and then away again. “I can wait or whatever.”

“Okay,” Steve said. He still felt like an asshole. “So are we good?”

“Sure, if you're good.”

Steve thought about it; he didn't know if he was actually good. He still felt pretty crappy, and he still hadn't really apologized. “Uh, okay, I just wanna say one other thing.”

Bill looked like he was in intense pain. “Are you *serious*, man?” he almost moaned. “It's been like twenty minutes.” Steve wondered if he was waiting for the part where they kissed for two hours too; he hoped so.

“Yeah, I know, I'm sorry. Actually, I, I am sorry – I'm really sorry about all that shit I said too.”

“Yeah, that's okay,” Bill said again right away. Steve wondered how much shit he could do and Bill would just say *it's okay* about it. “It don't matter.”

“No, I didn't mean, uh, I didn't mean that stuff about your girlfriend and all. That was really shitty, I shouldn't have said that to you.”

Billy made a face; he shifted over and moved away a couple inches. “That's okay,” he said again. “Not like it ain't true.”

“I still shouldn't have – “

“Man, you're allowed to say shit back to me when I'm being a fuckin' dickbag to you,” Bill told him.

“I just don't really wanna be that kind of person.”

“Me either.” Now he just looked really sad. “I knew I was bein' an asshole to you. I get goin', I can't stop. I didn't feel like sayin' a bunch of crap to you I didn't mean. That's why I told you to go home.”

“Yeah, well, I felt like shit all weekend,” Steve told him. “I thought you were really pissed at me.”

“Sorry. Figured you would.” Billy rubbed at his mouth; he was looking at the coffee table again. “I guess I just – uh.” He cleared his throat. “You know, when I was like a kid, and I was bein' a fucking brat over something, like if my dad wasn't around. My mom used to tell me, like, she'd said, uh, *I don't wanna do this with you*, she'd make me like go and play with my toys or whatever 'til I calmed down enough to talk to her. That's just what I wanted to do. I didn't feel like fightin' with you all night.”

Huh. “What would you be a brat about?” Steve asked him.

“I dunno, you talk to me for five minutes?”

“I mean, like, as an eight year old.”

“I dunno. Wanna go to the park or somethin'. Pissed off 'cause I wanted the expensive cereal.” Steve almost laughed and then he didn't laugh; cereal was a serious issue when you were eight (or when

you were nineteen, really). “Look, we okay now?”

“I think so,” Steve said. “Hey, I’m sorry,” he said again. “I was already pissed off when I got to your place on Friday, I had a really shitty day. I feel like I took that out on you.”

“That’s okay. Guess it’s hard to be perfect all the time.”

Steve guessed that Bill thought he was really funny or something. “Can you not tease me right now, we just stopped fightin’ like two minutes ago.”

“I’m not teasing you.” Billy had his dumb Steve-smile on his face now though. It was way, way better than the way he’d looked for the last half-hour; Steve almost felt normal again. “Hair’s perfect.”

“Shut up.”

Bill started grinning at him. “Shit, I really missed you, man,” he said suddenly; they were real close again. It was like this switch went off and they were just normal again.

“Yeah, I missed you too,” Steve told him.

“Did ya?” Bill was leaning in and Steve felt like an antelope or a wildebeest bein’ preyed on. Wildebeest were pretty dumb he thought. He let Bill press him up against the back of the couch; he pictured his legs stickin’ up like a deer on the National Geographic. “How much?” Their mouths finally touched.

Kissing was a good idea; they should have been doing this the whole time. Steve was really glad he’d brushed his teeth. “I dunno, how much did you miss me?”

“A lot.” Bill was attacking his neck. Steve got an arm around him and put his hand in Bill’s hair. He pulled him back so he could kiss him on the mouth again. Their noses brushed together and Billy started laughing. “Shit, man. I was so nervous to come over here, I brushed my fuckin’ teeth like three or four times,” he said; Steve started laughing too. “What?”

It felt like everything started moving really fast once he and Billy

started touching again. The couch was too small here in the living room – the couple times they'd hooked up in here before, they'd usually ended up on the floor. Bill was halfway on top of him and he had both his hands in Steve's hair and Steve felt a little breathless and a lot helpless; it wasn't exactly bad.

Billy sucked hard at a place right above Steve's collarbone until Steve made a sound. "Shit. Okay." Bill made him feel like a fourteen-year-old or something; he was gonna come in his work pants and screw up all his outfits for the entire week. Not that fourteen-year-olds had work pants, Steve guessed. Well, most of them.

"Sorry. Forgot you don't like that."

"Uhhhh," Steve said like a dork. The issue was that he liked it too much, actually. Sometimes it made him feel almost embarrassed or something. None of the girls he'd hooked up with before had ever really made him feel the way that Bill did, or had touched him the same way, even Nancy. Steve guessed he was kind of used to being the person who did everything to someone; that was fine and all but nobody had really spent a lot of time making him feel good just because they'd wanted to. Definitely no girl he'd been with had ever given him like three hickeys in one go, or played with his nipples until he couldn't talk, or spent twenty minutes kissing and biting his chest or his stomach. "Uh, you can keep going."

"Okay," Billy said but then he didn't keep going. They were like four inches apart and he was staring at Steve in this weird way. It was too dark in the room now; Steve couldn't tell what he looked like. "Hey. I lied to you earlier tonight."

Steve's heart felt like it had jumped into his throat; his boner almost died too. "Uh, what?" he croaked. *You don't love me.* He felt like a fucking idiot right away.

"I lied to you earlier," Bill told him again. "I said I wasn't jealous." He said, "I lied. I was so fucking jealous."

Oh. Jesus. Steve felt really dizzy. "Uh, you really don't have to be."

"Yeah, well." Bill sat up a little; he hooked two fingers around Steve's

belt and dragged him closer. His mouth was right on Steve's ear. "I hated thinkin' about you with somebody else."

"I'm not with somebody else," Steve told him.

"Makes me crazy. I was so jealous. You know she got you for a whole year, man."

Who? Steve almost asked like a moron. "Uh, ten months," he corrected.

"Whatever," Bill said shortly. "That's a year."

Steve didn't really know what to say; actually he didn't know why they were still talkin' at all. "You can have me for a year," he said like a dope.

Bill laughed a little like Steve had said something real funny. "Oh yeah? Whole year, huh?" They were really close together on the couch and Bill was touching him everywhere; Steve's hard-on was back in full force. "I hated thinkin' about you with her," Bill told him. "I hated thinkin' about her touching you."

Jesus. It was kind of screwed up but Billy saying that was so hot. "So don't think about it." Bill started to say something else so Steve kissed him again. They kissed for a while and Bill started to take Steve's belt off.

It kind of felt like he was drunk or something and he really didn't want to stop. Billy bit at his bottom lip which made him really crazy; he almost fell off the couch. He really didn't want to stop, but hooking up downstairs was probably a bad idea. He still wasn't sure why Bill had even wanted to come over here. "Uh, yeah, my, uh, my, my mom's here," he managed.

Bill kept on taking off Steve's belt. He'd always seemed to care before if Steve's mom was around when they did stuff – they'd almost gotten into fights about it. "Yeah, seen her car."

"We can't – " Apparently they could. Bill was still taking his belt off and Steve wasn't really stopping him. "We can, uh, we can go upstairs," Steve decided.

“Oh. Okay.”

The front hall was all dark which was weird; Steve didn't remember turnin' the lights off when Billy had came in. He bashed his hip against the end table in two seconds like he always did and then somehow they got upstairs. Bill spent too much time fuckin' with the radio – he got the oldies station on – and then Steve was pulling him down on the bed.

They just laid there for a couple seconds. Steve interlocked his arms around Bill's waist and put his face against Bill's neck. He felt too crazy again; he didn't even know if he wanted to hook up or talk more or just lay there or what. He'd really thought he'd screwed everything up. “I missed you,” he said.

“Yeah, I missed you too.” Bill had two fingers on the side of Steve's jaw; he tilted Steve's face up towards his. “C'mere.” Steve kissed him some more. Somehow he managed not to ask if his face was too greasy.

They kissed for a while and shifted around on Steve's little bed. It felt really different than being in Bill's room and Steve was trying to be quiet. He was pretty sure his shirt was somewhere out the window or something.

He got Billy pushed up against the headboard. Usually he guessed he liked it when Bill was on top of him, but he didn't mind climbin' up on him for once: it meant he couldn't go anywhere. Billy kept kissing him in this really slow way, and it wasn't what he wanted.

Steve bunched his fists up in Bill's new t-shirt (he still didn't know who the Red Hot Chili Peppers were). “Kiss me.” He was practically begging. He felt all desperate or screwed up or something.

“What, I am,” Billy said. He opened his mouth to bit Steve's lip though and put his arms around him. “I thought you wanted shit to be all romantic or whatever.”

“Uh, not right now.”

“Put the music on for ya.”

"Yeah, it's really nice." He started taking the stupid t-shirt off; Bill was grinning at him like Steve was in a comedy act.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked like he hadn't been saying a bunch of stupid romantic shit to Steve downstairs ten minutes ago. "Got all night." That meant Bill was gonna torture him for forever; Steve prayed to god his mom had taken her sleeping pills.

After they hooked up (it didn't really take forever – they hadn't screwed around for like three days) they laid around and talked about what they'd done on Friday when they'd been pissed at each other. Steve told Billy that he'd ate three sandwiches and watched a movie with his mom. Bill said he'd cried all night and let the cat climb on his bed. "Ate a frozen pizza too."

"Shut up, you did not," Steve said right away.

"Well I cooked it first," Billy told him like a dork; he was too stupid. The cat laying around on Bill's bed was almost more unbelievable than the crying thing. Actually Steve couldn't really picture Billy crying over anything, like ever. If he ever really did that it would be terrible; Steve didn't want to think about it.

"Were you really upset?"

"I guess. Didn't really cry all night, I had to get Max at ten-thirty," Billy said. Steve was laying on him again with his head tucked against Bill's shoulder so he couldn't see his face to see if he was being funny or not.

"She was real pissed at me, I dunno if I'm gonna be allowed over anymore," Steve told him.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that too." Billy sounded really embarrassed again. "I told her to cut her shit out, I ain't tell her to act like that."

"I know."

Bill was running his hand through Steve's hair; it felt nice. "So what you do on Saturday?"

"Mm. The same stuff. Played hockey. We went to the mall too,

probably not the same one you were at. Marion Central, it's kinda far."

"Yeah, you're lucky you weren't there with those girls." Bill sounded like he had war trauma or something. He'd probably had to go in that girly store that sold all the bracelets.

"I thought, uh, you might be lookin' for a new boyfriend at the mall on Saturday," Steve said and then wished he hadn't. He was so needy. It was kind of a joke but he was so needy.

Billy didn't say anything for a couple seconds. He moved his arm down and touched Steve's shoulder-blade. "That funny to you or somethin'?"

"No. It's not funny." This weird silence hung between them.

"How come you always think I'm gonna fuck around on you?"

"I don't. I didn't really mean that."

"You said that shit to me before too," Bill said, kinda slowly, like he was thinking about it; Steve really didn't want him to be thinking about it. He didn't sound pissed. "When we got in that fight 'bout that record you got me."

Steve felt kinda surprised that he remembered that. They hadn't really said they'd been going out back then. Bill coulda hooked up with somebody else if he wanted.

"No, I don't really ... " He felt real overwhelmed for a second and he wasn't sure why; it almost felt like he was about to cry again or something, like how he'd felt earlier when Billy had told him he was too sweet. It felt like too much stuff. "Sorry. I don't really think that. I don't, uh – guess I don't have the greatest track record with that stuff." Nancy he guessed. He felt so dumb.

Billy didn't say anything again. "Yeah. Guess I know that," he said in a weird voice. He kept on touching Steve's shoulder. "You know not everybody's gonna do that to you, man."

"I know. I know that."

Bill didn't say anything some more. "I wasn't lookin' for some other guy," he said finally. "I like the one I got."

Steve put his face back against Billy's neck. "Yeah, me too."

"Henderson," Billy said like a moron in two seconds.

Steve tried to sit up. Bill wrapped his arms around his waist and started cackling. "You are *such* an asshole – "

"Hahahahaha!" Bill said. "Quit squirmin', Jesus. I'M JOKING!"

Steve settled back down. "You're lucky we already got off, I get sick when you talk about Dustin that way."

"That's mean," Bill told him.

"I doubt he would be offended." Then again, who could tell. Dustin was a total weirdo. "Hey, uh, why was he talkin' about business at your house for? Did you get him weed or something?"

"Fuck you, I ain't wastin' my stash on that little turd," Bill said. "Don't worry about it, was just some dumb shit I asked him about."

"Hm. Okay." Billy had started running his hands down his back some more and it felt really good. Steve wrapped his arms around him again and closed his eyes.

"Don't fall asleep, I can't actually stay here all night," Bill warned him.

"I'm not," Steve lied. He was totally going to fall asleep.

They laid together for a really long time; Steve had no clue how late it was. It was really nice to lay around with somebody and kind of fall asleep with them. Steve guessed that was why people moved into together and got married and shit.

The room was quiet aside from the radio, playing softly next to the bed. Some lady singer was singin' some old love song that Bill said he knew all the words to and then rudely refused to sing them.

Billy was moving his hand up and down Steve's back; he kept touching him with two or three fingers, kind of like he was making a pattern. After a couple minutes Steve realized Bill was poking all his stupid birth marks or something. He hitched his shoulder a couple times. "Hey."

"Come on, man, I was countin'," Bill complained. He smoothed a hand over Steve's shoulder-blade.

"Mmph. Quit it."

Billy ignored him; he kept touchin' Steve's back. "You got a lotta beauty marks, man. I like 'em. Like your freckles too."

He was making Steve feel all dumb inside again, like his heart was squeezing against his ribs. "You don't think they look like a buncha ticks or something?"

Billy didn't answer him for a couple seconds. "Do you have brain damage?" he asked Steve exaggeratedly. "Somebody say that shit to you?"

"No. I don't know. I always hated them."

"You look great, man."

"Thanks." Steve closed his eyes and let Bill do his weird counting-thing.

He really did almost fall asleep; at about four AM Bill got kinda weird like Steve figured he would and said that he had to go soon. "I don't wanna have breakfast with your moms."

Steve didn't really want to move or let him go but eventually he flopped over so that Bill could get up. He watch Billy put his t-shirt back on and scan the room.

"Where the fuck did my pants go?" He was standin' there in his donut boxers; it made Steve smile. "What?"

"Nothing. I don't know."

Billy finally found his jeans over by the dresser and put them on. "Guess you can keep my belt," he said all grumpy. "Hey, come over tomorrow if you want."

"Okay."

"Just come in if I'm not there, I'll leave the door open for ya."

"Yeah, you really need to stop doing that," Steve told him.

Billy raised his eyebrows. "But then how would you get in?" he asked like Steve was bein' funny. He threw Steve's blanket over him. "You want your window open?"

Steve had no clue how or why Bill knew that he slept with his window open sometimes. "I'm okay."

"Okay." Bill leaned down and scrubbed a hand through Steve's hair in an annoying way, then kissed him two times which was nice. "Bye."

"You want me to walk you out?"

"Nah, I'm okay."

"Okay. Be careful drivin' home."

"Sure thing." Bill left and closed the door behind him. A couple minutes later Steve heard his car start out on the street. He guessed they hadn't woken his mom up after all.

It only took Steve about five minutes to fall asleep, which never happened. He dreamt about Bill touching his back and saying *I fuckin' love you, lemme get five dollars of premium.*

Work on Monday was pretty good and it went by quickly for once. In

the morning when Steve came in Linda gave him two candy bars.

“Why'd you get me chocolate?” Steve asked her. It was a quarter to nine and she already had a huge stack of paperwork in front of her.

Linda was scribbling away on one of her yellow legal pads. She was going crazy because Terri was gonna be in charge of the office when they left on Wednesday; she had two Post-It notes stuck to her blouse. “Cause I was at the market earlier this morning and I thought about you.”

Oh. That was nice, Steve guessed. “Thanks, I'm not a little kid, though,” he told her. He was already eating the candy bar.

Linda looked up and gave him this huge smile; Steve guessed he was being funny or something. He wasn't *not* going to eat a chocolate bar if someone gave it to him.

After work he went home and got changed. Mom was still out so Steve fed the dogs and went over to Bill's place like he'd said. No one answered when he knocked so he tried the door; it was open like it usually was.

The apartment was super organized for once – it looked all homey and shit. Something was cooking in the stove and there were new white Christmas lights hangin' up on the back wall in the living room. Steve wondered if Bill had been doing his crazy cleaning thing over the weekend or something. He'd probably even double-vacuumed like a weird person.

Nobody was in the living room but Max and Billy were sitting squished together out on the little balcony. Billy was smoking a cigarette and Max was talking to him in her animated way. Steve didn't know what she was going off about, but there were hand gestures.

Chewy swished back and forth between them flickin' her tail. She pressed her face against the sliding-glass door once she noticed Steve. Bill flopped his head back and got a big grin on his face when he saw him; that was nice. He jumped up and let the cat in, then came inside too.

“Hey, what you doin' here?”

Chewy made a beeline for him so Steve picked her up. “You said come over tomorrow.”

Billy just looked at him for a second; he was leaning up against the kitchen counter. “Yeah, I meant tomorrow like Tuesday, I gotta do something later.”

“Oh. Oh, right, okay.” Steve felt kind of dumb. “Uh, do you want me to go?”

“Nah, you can stay for a while.” Billy had his look on his face like Steve was real funny; Steve guessed he was being super amusing today. “I'll make ya dinner. I gotta go to the store real quick, just stay here. Make shithead say sorry to you.”

“Okay.” Bill left with his wallet and Steve took Chewy and went over to the smaller couch. Chewy purred louder than the engine of Bill's Camaro. Steve turned the TV up over her.

The sliding-glass door opened and shut again; there was a fumbling sound as Max locked it. She came around the kitchen counter and stood by the TV lookin' down at him. Her bright hair was up in a ponytail, spilling down the side of her neck, and she had her red work-vest from the general store on still. They stared at each other for a couple seconds.

“Hi Steve,” Max said finally in a subdued voice.

“Hey.” Steve felt pretty wary; he couldn't exactly say that he'd been looking forward to talkin' to Max. He clutched Chewy for protection. “You gonna yell at me some more?”

She wrinkled her nose up at him. “No.” Steve didn't answer so she made her goldfish face too. “Sorry I was being a bitch to you again.”

Max had the same way about her that Bill did; whatever it was made Steve want to forgive them both in two seconds. “Yeah, you kind of were,” he said anyway.

“I know. I'm really sorry.”

"You didn't even ask me what was goin' on," Steve pointed out. "I thought, uh, we were friends too or whatever."

"We are!" yelled Max.

"Are we? I dunno." Steve looked at her some more. She did look sorry but it wasn't the first time she'd flipped out at him over some dumb shit. "Look, I know Bill's your brother, but you could cut me some slack sometimes."

"I know. I'm sorry. Billy got upset when he saw you guys! I thought ... " she trailed off with a big frown on her face. "I don't know."

Steve knew what she'd thought. "You need to quit actin' like I'm gonna screw you guys over all the time."

"I know. I'm really sorry," Max said again. She was frowning and chewing on her lip; she had her arms folded across her chest like she was protecting herself. "I felt really bad after. Billy yelled at me, um, a lot. Oh!" She brightened a little and trooped back off to the kitchen. Steve wondered if she was gettin' a butcher knife or something. "I made you these cookies yesterday, I wanted to say sorry."

She came back over holding the plate of them. Steve tried to remain unaffected; they were chocolate chip. "What, did you poison 'em?"

Max gave him a big look and rolled her eyes. "Not this time, they're just regular," she told him. She stood there looking at him. "Do you forgive me?"

"Uh, I don't know." Steve eyed the cookies. He wasn't, like, just some pushover who you could holler at all the time and then give a buncha food to. He did love chocolate though.

"Please, Steve? I promise my mom got *nowhere* near these," Max told him all emphatically (Susan's cooking wasn't even that bad but whatever). "I used a whole bag of chocolate chips!"

Okay well. Steve felt kind of cranky. Bill said that Max worked him over all the time and Steve was startin' to see what he meant. He wasn't just *not* going to eat them. "Okay fine lemme try one," he said; Max beamed at him.

Steve ate his cookies – by the third one he was pretty sure they weren't poisoned. Max watched him all happy for a couple minutes. She told him about goin' to the mall with Bill on Saturday: he'd been really sad, Max said. "He laid in his room for four hours listening to the same Janis Joplin song, me and El had to lure him out of the house." Steve didn't know how Bill would feel about Max volunteering up such sensitive information about him. They watched the end of *Crime Story* together and then Max went off to take a shower.

Billy came back in right after she'd gone. He had more grocery bags and was soaking wet; he shook his hair like a dog. "Fuckin' tsunami outside," he grunted. Apparently it was never gonna stop raining; July was always pretty bad around here for some reason. "How come you ain't get wet?"

"Guess I just missed it."

Bill started to go by him with his groceries and then scowled. "Hey, quit stuffin' your fuckin' face." He pulled the plate away from Steve. "I said I'd cook you something."

"I can still eat," Steve told him; Bill took the cookies back over to the counter because he was a terrible person. Steve followed him into the kitchen and sat at the table. "What are you guys making?"

"Dunno, Max wants some chicken thing, she already started it. Got a recipe book from Henderson's mom. I gotta do sides or whatever."

Steve guessed Dustin had been bringing a bunch of weird stuff over again. "Do you want help?"

Bill gave him this skeptical look and Steve felt cranky again; he could cook some things. "Thanks, I'm good."

"Okay."

He watched Billy set up his groceries and rifle through his cookbook. It was kind of cute or something, actually. Steve had made food a couple times for Bill and Max, but Bill could cook too, even though it wasn't really something you'd think about. Steve guessed he'd kind of

had to learn some stuff – Bill's mom had died like when he was twelve or thirteen, and his dad didn't exactly look like the type of person who made dinner a lot.

“What are you gonna make?” Steve asked him.

“Uh, these fried potatoes.” Billy wrinkled his nose up at the recipe book. He looked over at Steve. “The fuck's *parboiling*?”

“Yeah, you're asking the wrong person.”

Bill rolled his eyes. He went over to the bathroom door and started bangin' away on it. “MAX! WHAT'S *PARBOILING*!”

Something thumped loudly in the bathroom and Max yelped. “Oh my *god*! What the hell's wrong with you? I'm literally naked right now!”

Billy made a face and banged on the door some more. “What's *parboiling*?” he asked again.

“Jesus! It's when you boil the water before you put something in, dumbass!”

“Okay.” Bill stared blankly at the door, then went back over to the counter. “Ain't that what you're supposed to do anyway?”

“Still asking the wrong person,” Steve told him; Billy smiled at him.

“BILLY! DON'T FORGET TO WASH YOUR HANDS!” Max yelled her head off from the bathroom.

“Jesus *Christ*.” He did wash his hands though.

It was kind of fun to watch Billy do normal stuff or whatever; Steve guessed he was pretty boring like that. His favorite day was Sunday, when he got to watch Max and Bill make breakfast in the morning together and scream at each other. It was like bein' with your family or something. He watched Bill set up the water to (par)boil, then peel a bunch of potatoes and put them in a bowl. “You're not gonna do a vegetable?” Steve asked him.

He looked really offended. “It is a vegetable.”

“Okay, okay.” Steve decided not to get into that debate. “Hey, so what are you doing tonight?”

“Huh?” Billy looked up at him again all surprised.

“You said you had something to do later.”

Bill didn't answer him for a couple seconds. “Oh, yeah. Told Max I'd hang out with her.”

“Oh, okay. Are you gonna go out and all?”

“Probably.”

“Do you need me to drive you somewhere?”

Bill's eyebrows went up like when Steve was really amusing him; maybe he sounded like a Den Dad or something. “My car's okay.”

“Okay,” Steve said too. Bill kept on pokin' at his food. “Uh, am I not allowed to hang out with you guys?” Steve asked him. He and Max were cool again, he thought.

“Yeah, you don't wanna hang out with us. Just some dumb shit we're gonna do.”

“What are you gonna do?”

Bill looked at him again and didn't say anything. He started cutting up his potatoes. He was chewing on his bottom lip now; he still looked like Steve was being funny though. “Nothin'.”

He was acting kind of weird – Steve sat there and watched him for a couple seconds. Billy wasn't really the most talkative person even on a good day, but he'd never really had a problem before with telling Steve what he was doing or where he was gonna be at. He was kinda acting like he had a secret or something; that was definitely weird. “You really won't tell me what you're doing?”

“I don't know, man, she just wants me to take her to a couple places.”

“Okay,” Steve said doubtfully.

Bill looked up at him again. "What?"

"Nothing. Uh, I don't have to come with you."

"Okay." Now he even had his smile on his face like Steve was being funny. "When you goin' on your big trip?"

"Uh, Wednesday."

"We can hang out tomorrow before you go, 'f you want. You can stay over."

"Okay," Steve said too. He watched Bill get his stuff set up on the stove. "Are you going to a party?"

Bill turned and looked at him for a second. "Yeah, with my lame-ass sister." Steve stared at him. "If I was goin' to a party I'd take *you*, shithead." He looked like Steve was being even funnier. "What, don't trust me?"

"Uh, sure I do."

"Okay." He leaned forward on the counter. "Why you bein' weird?"

"I'm not, uh, I'm not being weird, you're being weird," Steve told him. "Do you just want me to go or something?"

"No, I don't want you go." Now he had his little smile on his face again. Steve didn't really see what was so amusing. "Thought you were eatin' with me."

"Uh, I am." He kind of felt like a dramatic baby or something which was not-great since he'd just called Bill a dramatic baby a couple nights ago. "I just thought you'd wanna do something."

"We are doin' something."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess," Steve said like a huge baby.

"How come you wanna hang out tonight so bad?"

"I don't know, I'm already here." Bill was making him feel pretty

dumb; he obviously didn't want Steve to know what he was doing. That was weird. "I won't be around for a couple days. I didn't see you like all weekend." He felt stupid after he'd said it. They didn't have to hang out every night or something.

Bill's expression changed and he stopped lookin' like Steve was funny. "Yeah, I know that. Look, just come over tomorrow, we can do whatever you want."

"Okay." Steve looked over Bill's shoulder. "Uh, your pan's got smoke coming out of it."

"*Shit.*" Billy turned back to the stove. He started cooking or frying his potatoes; the room filled with the sound of oil sizzling and Bill cursing, so Steve had to stop asking him a million questions for a couple minutes.

Steve guessed he felt kind of sulky or whatever. It wasn't like he minded spending a night at home by himself. Okay, he minded, but that wasn't really anything new. It was just for one night. He'd just thought that Billy would have wanted to hang out with him too, especially after yesterday. It wasn't a big deal but he felt bad or dumb or something.

Max came out into the kitchen a couple minutes later; she had on her huge pajama bottoms that had flowers on them and one of Bill's old cut up t-shirts. "Billy!" She started complaining in two seconds. "You can't cook these too long, they'll get all squishy!" She snatched the spatula away from him.

"No they won't."

"Did you even read the recipe?"

"Sure did." Bill leaned over her so Max elbowed him in the chest.

She glanced over her shoulder at Steve. "Can you set the table?"

"Uh, sure." Steve got up. "That's some real fancy nightwear you got on, Max."

Max looked totally blank. "What do you mean? I worked all day!" she

said defensively.

“Thought you were going to help me with that thing later,” Bill told her.

“What thing?” Max said like a dodo; Bill stared at her. “OH! I mean, sure.” She looked back and forth between him and Steve. “Um. At your ... work?” she tried.

“Jesus.” Billy rubbed his face.

Okay they were definitely making Steve feel even weirder; they were both really bad liars. “All right, you guys don't have to tell me what you're doing.”

“Oh. No, it's not that!” Max looked stricken; her eyes widened and she made her biggest goldfish face. “Billy wanted to ... um, I'm leaving on Wednesday too, you know!” she told Steve. “I have to stay at home with Mom tomorrow. I'll be in stupid Brentwood for a whole week, I told Billy I'd hang out with him tonight.”

Steve had actually kind of forgotten that Max was goin' to be with her dad in California for like a week. He guessed that Bill would be kind of embarrassed to say that he'd just wanted to spend time alone with his sister or something. He didn't have to act like a nut about it though. “Oh, right. Okay.”

“Sorry. I didn't know you guys had plans.”

“Uh, that's okay. I'll just go home later.”

“Okay. Sorry.” Max was giving Bill a big look; he ignored it and took the spatula from her again.

They all ate dinner together. It was kind of strange to eat at the table for once (that was what the couch was for), but it was what Max wanted, Steve guessed.

She glumly detailed to them all the plans she and her dad had made for next week. “We probably won't even do anything, he already changed my flight time *two times*. He did this to me last year too when he finally got a new job. That was why my mom left him, you

know,” she told Steve. “He could never – ” she made a face, changed her mind. “Of course now he's all successful *now*.”

Bill looked like he was tryin' hard not to say something crappy. “Just make 'im buy you a buncha shit, man. He owes you.”

“I guess.” Max still looked glum.

The food was pretty good; Bill hadn't overcooked the potatoes or whatever. Max said that he'd used too much salt but Steve thought they were all right. Afterwards he helped Bill clean up the kitchen while Max trooped off to go and get changed again. She came back out of her room wearin' her jeans and a striped tank top and Steve guessed it was time for him to go.

He tried to remember where he'd put his car keys. “Max, have a good time if I don't see ya. Bring me somethin' back, okay?”

“I will! Will you get me something too?”

“Sure,” Steve said. “I guess I'll just see you later or whatever,” he told Bill.

“Okay.” Billy was going through a bunch of tapes on his bookcase; Max was sitting and looking at him all impatient. “You want me to call you?”

“Uh, if you want.”

“Okay. Hey, Steve.”

Steve stopped and looked at him; Bill was looking back. “What?”

“You like Genesis better with Phil Collins or Peter Gabriel?”

Steve stared at him skeptically; he wondered if Billy was tryin' to get in a fight with him after all. “Collins, I guess.”

“Figures.”

“Uh, why?”

"I'm just asking."

"Okay." Steve waited for the smart comment but it didn't come. "All right, see ya."

Bill walked him out. He caught the hem of Steve's t-shirt as he was leavin'. "Hey man, we good?"

Billy could make him feel all stupid without even touching him; it wasn't fair. "Yeah, sure. Yeah, we're good."

"So you wanna do something tomorrow?"

"I don't know. Maybe, uh, if I have time for you, Tuesday's like real busy for me," Steve said suavely; Bill leaned against the doorway and grinned at Steve like he was real cute. Steve was real cute so that was okay. "Yeah, we can do something."

"Okay. I'll call ya."

"Okay," Steve said. A door opened down the hall and a younger lady came out carryin' her kid so Bill let him go. "Have fun, see you."

"Later."

"STEVE, DON'T FORGET YOUR COOKIES!" Max yelled her head off. She gave Steve a container and sent him on his way.

Steve drove around for a while; he wasn't ready to go home yet. He didn't really feel bad or anything but he didn't exactly feel great either.

It wasn't like he didn't trust Billy or anything, especially after everything that'd happened. If he said he was hanging out with Max then he was probably hanging out with Max. It was just that Steve got too stupid about stuff and he'd forget that other people didn't get stupid about the same stuff. He and Bill didn't have to hang out every night just because they were dating or whatever.

It had been raining pretty hard out earlier but it wasn't that bad now. As he drove down Main Street he passed Dust and Lucas wheeling their bikes away from the comic book shop; Steve beeped his horn so

they'd see him.

Lucas said he was running late for dinner and Steve said he'd give him a ride home. Dust's mom was working late though so he didn't have anything to do. Once they dropped Lucas off, Dustin asked a million questions about him and Bill (Steve answered like half of them) and then asked Steve if they could hang out.

"Sure, we can something," Steve told him. He was trying hard not to feel bad – he'd just let himself get all dumb about Bill again in two seconds. Dust had hung out with him this weekend though when he'd been alone and had just wanted to sulk and eat chips; he'd kind of helped Steve too even if he hadn't realized it. Steve did want to be with Bill all the time but he should think about his other friends too.

He thought about it now. "Hey, you mind if we drive by my buddy Alex's place? I wanna see if he wants to hang out, I keep forgetting to call him."

"Sure, I guess. Is he cool?" Dust asked him. He fumbled around on the dashboard. "Uh, WHOSE COOKIES ARE THESE?"

Alex had been home and he'd wanted to hang out. He seemed pretty happy to see Steve even though Steve had brought a loud excitable fifteen-year-old over to his house. Alex worked until seven every weeknight, and he said that by the time he got out of work, everybody usually was already drunk or had plans. Steve guessed he knew the feeling – he'd felt that way all last year when Dust had been in school and the rest of Steve's friends had been off at college. It was almost like you were in a different universe or something. All he'd done was hope that Bill would be around to hang out with him at the diner.

Dustin and Alex got along pretty well like Steve'd figured. They

played Alex's Nintendo for a while and Dust somehow managed to keep his mouth shut about Steve's gay lifestyle. He'd been a little worried but he shouldn't have been worried.

It was an okay night. Steve got up the next morning a little early and made himself breakfast. He was sitting in the kitchen in his work pants and his undershirt drinkin' coffee when Mom came in and stood in the doorway looking at him. "What are you doing home?"

It was Tuesday morning. Steve drank his coffee. "Weird thing, I still live here. Is that okay?"

"Of course, I just – " Mom cut herself off and stared at him. She had a funny look on her face: her mouth made a straight line and her eyes got kinda big. She had on her pink robe and some stupid fake-gold necklace Steve had got her when he'd been like twelve; he didn't know why she always wore that thing. She leaned against the doorway, looking at him and not saying anything.

She looked at him for so long that Steve felt massively weird. He wondered if she was having a stroke or something. "What happened, are you okay?"

"No, I – " Mom started like she'd been dreaming and smiled at him. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry, I just woke up. Ignore me."

"Uh, do you not want me to be home?" Steve asked her.

"Of course I want you to be home." She swept past him and opened up one of the kitchen cabinets. "I am surprised though, I thought you would be over at Billy's," she said into the cabinet.

Steve burned his mouth on his coffee. Mom continued before he could answer: "I saw his car here the other night."

Oh. Right. "Yeah, uh, he came over here."

"Did you, uh, *make up*?" Mom sounded like she was teasing him.

"Yeah, we talked."

"That's nice, I'm glad." She moved around him, getting her coffee set

up. “You know you can always – “ she stopped again; Steve had no clue what she'd been about to say. She was looking at him with one of her weird expressions again. “Am I seeing you before you leave tomorrow? I'll probably be working late tonight, will you call me?”

“Yeah, sure. I'll probably be home for a while. I can come home in the morning.”

“All right. Don't let your father make you too upset.” She messed up his hair. “Don't go to any strip clubs.”

Jesus. “Okay, I won't, since you asked me.”

Mom stood there smiling and looking at him with her coffee. Then she leaned over and poked at his collar-bone, *not* gently. “I'm assuming you're going to button your shirt up for work. That better be gone by my party this weekend, or you are *not* allowed in the pool.”

Holy shit. Steve's face burned. He was such a dope; he remembered Bill sucking on his neck two nights ago. You couldn't really see it with a regular shirt on so Steve had kind of forgotten about it. “Uh, I was just – ”

“Please. I don't need to know about it. I really don't need to know about it. Honestly, Steven.”

“Okay, I didn't know you were gonna come down here and frickin' inspect me.” Holy shit he was so dumb.

“I wasn't inspecting you. I'm innocent in this, it's too early for me to see these things. And don't swear.”

“That's not a swear,” Steve told her.

Mom ignored him; she was already leaving the room. “Please be careful driving. I love you.”

“Okay.” Mom leaned back out the doorway and stared at him. “What, I love you too.” Jeez.

Mom went on her way and Steve went back upstairs to finish getting

dressed. He did have a big purple mark right below his neck; he couldn't believe he hadn't thought about it. At least his mom hadn't beaten the crap out of him this time. He was running pretty late so he didn't have time to start freaking out about whether or not she knew about him and Bill.

She might know; Steve wasn't sure. He guessed he was going to get to deal with that when he got back from his trip. *You know you can always* what. Date a guy. Change your mind about datin' a guy. If Mom really knew and she disapproved she'd be screamin' at him already; she liked to do that. That wouldn't be fair of her because she was always talking about gay rights and ethics and how Regan was killing everybody and how she had gay friends at her work, or in her family.

Well, now it was definitely in her family, Steve thought. Dad always hated it when Mom talked about her one cousin who had girlfriends; he almost hadn't let Steve visit when Steve was a kid. He'd said that –

Okay Steve was really late and still not freaking out. He went out to his car and put his thoughts out of his head.

Work was super-busy because the office was basically losing half of its staff for the rest of the week. Everybody worked through lunch and Linda ordered takeout for everyone. Steve had barely gotten a chance to talk to her this morning. Linda was real sweet and all but she was serious about her job; sometimes she could be pretty scary. Steve knew when to bug her and when to leave her alone.

The phone on his desk rang at a quarter-past four, though; Linda came on the line soundin' super-annoying. “Stevie, you got a phone call, you want me to patch you through?”

“Uh, sure, go ahead.” It was probably Dust or something with something dumb to say. “Hello?” Steve said once the line beeped twice.

“Hey honey,” Bill said all loud like a moron. Steve was pretty sure his face turned bright red.

“Hey, uh, what, what're you doing?”

“Thought you wanted me to call you.”

Steve scribbled his name on the last of his papers. He wasn't sure how Billy could make him feel like a total dope in two seconds just by calling him some dumb name. He'd definitely never called Steve at his job before or anything. “Sure, I did.”

“I'm just checkin' on ya.”

“Thanks. Are you at work?”

“Yeah, you still wanna do something later?”

“Sure, if you want.”

“Okay. I probably gotta stay here kinda late, maybe like seven-thirty. We just got this new truck in, some asshole wrecked out on the highway.”

“That's okay, I gotta run home anyway.” Linda had come into the back room and was walking by with a bunch of papers. She gave Steve a really stupid grin which he tried to ignore; it made her grin at him even more. Steve stared at his papers. “Uh, what do you wanna do later?”

“Doesn't matter. What you wanna do? Max's gone.”

Whee. Steve was pretty sure he knew what he wanted to do later; it involved a lot of lube and some romantic music. “Uh, it doesn't matter.”

“Hey, who's that chick that picked the phone up?” Bill asked him. “That your old lady you're always talkin' about?”

Steve was pretty sure his face was still really red. “Yeah, that's Linda, did she say anything to you?”

“Yeah, talked to me for like ten minutes.”

Jesus. That was so great. Steve felt like he was on the loudspeaker or something. “Uh, that's, that's wonderful, really. What did she say?”

Bill laughed at him. "Don't worry, I was real nice to her."

Jesus, again. "I bet you were."

"I just wanted to call you. Come over whenever you want, okay? You can stay over."

"Okay. You want me to get you food?"

"Up to you." They talked for a couple minutes more: Billy said he was bringing his car into the shop tomorrow so they could start fixing up the trunk and detailing it; he'd finally saved enough money. He said he owed his boss a breakfast sandwich for the rest of the week since the Angels had won their basketball game the other night – Bill always bet against the Angels because his old man liked them so much.

Steve wondered what Billy was gonna do without his car for the rest of the week; maybe he could take Steve's while he was in the city. He also wondered why Billy had called him at work anyway, not that it was bad or anything. He just didn't really do stuff like that, and he was even kind of talking a lot. Steve wondered if maybe Bill still felt sorry or something, or if maybe (oh god) he'd done something bad last night.

Okay nope he wasn't doing that. He wasn't starting his stupid crazy overthinking shit. He definitely wasn't doing that; they'd just talked about that stuff. Steve told him he'd be over around eight and Bill said okay and that they could watch a movie or something. Finally they hung up and then Steve could act like a normal person again. Actually Bill didn't make him feel like a fourteen-year-old; he made Steve feel like he was twelve or something. Jesus. It was nice to get called at work though.

Everyone closed up shop at around five. Steve guessed he was excited to not be in the office for a while. Once he got home, he played with Luke and Leia since he wouldn't see them for a couple days. They were getting kind of old (Steve hated it when people said that shit but he had to think it privately) and they didn't really go super-nuts anymore but they still needed, like, socialization or whatever. Maybe Bill could come over too and see them while Steve was gone. He was

going to have Eleven with him for the weekend, but she'd seemed to like the dogs that one time.

Steve spent some time cleaning up the house so Mom wouldn't have to do everything later; he finally did his laundry too. He ordered a lot of Chinese food and then went over to Bill's place. He got to drive his dad's Lexus since he had to drive out into the city tomorrow.

Dad had two cars: this one and some fancy sports car he never even drove. Steve's mom had made some huge fuss last week when Dad had dropped the Lexus off so that Steve could take it. Steve had thought she'd be happy; now it looked like Dad was actually home for once.

Billy let him in once he'd gotten over to the apartment – the door was actually locked for once. Bill was wearing a new shirt again; this one was blue and had a pattern on the sleeves. He looked kinda tired which was about right for a Tuesday.

The apartment was a huge mess now and it looked totally different than it had last night. Steve kinda wondered if Bill had had a party after all. There were tapes and records everywhere and the couch was moved around weird. The record player that Steve had gotten him was pushed in the center of the room and there were even records piled up on the kitchen counter.

Steve looked around; he almost didn't know where to put the food. “Uh, what the hell happened?”

“Couldn't decide what I wanted to listen to.” Bill took the paper bag from him and started tearin' through it like a rat or something. “What you get me?” Somehow he already had food in his mouth.

Steve ignored him – he was eating it already anyway. “So did you guys get to do whatever it was last night?”

“Sure did.” Bill was grinning at him and he looked like Steve was being hilarious really. It was making him feel kind of weird again.

Okay he wasn't gonna let himself get all screwed up again or start asking Bill a million questions he wasn't gonna answer. He'd wanted

to come over and be with Billy and here he was. He wasn't going to spend all night sulking or whatever. They ate their food together on the couch and then Bill showed him the movie he wanted to watch; it was this battered-up copy of some flick from the '70s called *The Warriors*. "Shit's like my favorite."

Steve wasn't surprised. "Yeah, I saw part of that on the TV before. Where'd you get that?" Billy had made him watch a ton of movies before but that hadn't been one of them.

Bill was hunched over the VCR setting it up; his new jeans were *really* tight. "Got it offa Byers the other night."

Okay Steve was surprised after all. "Uh, Will had that?" He was pretty sure it was rated R – that was whatever, but Mrs. Byers was kinda crazy about that stuff.

Bill gave him a look. "No, the other one."

"What, Jonathan?" Bill gave him another look. "Uh, when'd you hang out with him?"

"I didn't." Bill flopped down on the couch next to Steve and put his head in his lap. "Had to pick his brother up for the movie, remember?"

"Yeah, but when'd he give you the tape?" Bill had lent Jonathan that record and all Steve guessed.

Billy looked like Steve was being hilarious again which was so great. "You're askin' me a lot of questions, man."

"I just didn't know you guys were friends."

"We're not." Bill wrinkled his nose up and made a disgusted face.

"Okay." Steve still felt kind of grumpy but he wasn't going to get into it. Anyway the movie started two seconds later and Bill told him to be quiet a bunch of times; he was so romantic. He said he wasn't going to sit around explaining everything the whole time because Steve had missed something talking. "Whatever, I don't even do that, you're the one who's saying a bunch of – UH, wait, who shot that

guy?" Steve asked, looking up at the screen.

"Jesus. It ain't important yet." They watched the movie for a couple minutes and then Billy started talking too. "I read the book before, they changed a lotta shit."

"I didn't know it was a book." Billy had his head in Steve's lap still so Steve was playing around with his hair.

"Yeah, was supposed to take place in the fifties. They turned the main guy into a white dude too. Guess that's what sells." Bill was really funny. "Gimme me some chips," he commanded; they had a bunch of snacks out on the coffee table.

"Why? You can reach 'em," Steve told him. Bill stared at him. "What? They're like two feet away."

"I can't move, I'm laying on you."

"But it's closer to you," Steve said to no avail.

"Do it real sexy-like, act like you're feeding me a grape or something."

"Uh, yeah, I'm not gonna – " Bill stared at him some more; Steve rolled his eyes and fed him the chips. Billy crunched on them with his mouth open. "Oh, my god, you look like a fucking monster, I'm gonna bust through my jeans." Billy cackled and almost choked on his Doritos.

Steve got confused during a couple places in the movie so Bill had to tell him what was going on anyway. It was kind of embarrassing, Steve thought, but Bill seemed happy enough to talk about it. Sometimes for Steve it felt like it was too hard to pay attention or something. Two scenes had gone by already and he was still tryin' to figure out if one of the kids in the group had really gotten hit by a subway train or not. "You'd just think they'd make a bigger deal out of it."

"It's a fuckin' movie, baby," Bill told him. He was really going off with the nicknames or whatever this week; Steve couldn't say he minded.

“Do people in gangs really dress up like that?” Steve asked him. One of the black guys had a big hat and a pimp cane; Steve was pretty sure that was, like, racist or something.

“Maybe in New York or whatever.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“You think I could pull off a vest like that?” Bill asked him; Steve laughed.

“Probably.” The main chick in the film was super pretty – she looked like a dream or something. The guy was pretty hot too Steve guessed. “Hey, do you think he's cute or whatever?”

Billy made another disgusted face. “Who?”

“I don't know, the uh, the main guy.” Now he and dream-chick were makin' out on some abandoned train-tracks. Steve wasn't sure if she was supposed to be like a prostitute or what.

“He's old.”

“No he's not, he's like thirty.”

“That's old,” Bill told him.

Steve leaned over his lap and looked at Billy. “I just wanna know what kinda guys you like.”

Bill squinted up at him and glared for a long time. “I don't know. I like you,” he said gruffly.

Okay. That was cute and all. Steve let himself feel stupid for a couple seconds. “Yeah, I meant like famous people.”

Billy didn't say anything for a while. “I don't really notice shit like that.”

“Okay.” As usual Billy made no sense; Steve kept on watching the movie. When it ended Bill seemed to really want him to like it so Steve said it was good. He felt like there was a bunch of symbolism

or something that he didn't really understand but it'd been okay.

Billy still had some beers left; they each drank two and then crowded around in the little bathroom brushing their teeth together. Billy took a shower for a long time and then he climbed on top of Steve on the bed. They started doing the kissing thing which led into the sex thing; that lasted for a while. They didn't really get up to anything super athletic though because Bill said he'd busted his arm at the shop really bad. He seemed kind of embarrassed about it or something. He still gave Steve an amazing blowjob which Steve tried to reciprocate.

“Do you wanna go again?” Bill asked him. They'd put their underwear back on and were just laying there; Steve guessed he'd been staring at Billy or something.

Steve could go again like four more times – they were still making up from the weekend when they'd been apart. Mostly he just wanted Billy to feel good. “It doesn't matter if you're tired.”

“Sorry. Twisted my shoulder movin' a buncha doors, Hank can't lift for shit.”

“I can rub your back if you want,” Steve told him.

Bill made a face like he'd said something really hysterical. “Yeah, okay.”

“What, it'll be, uh, sexy or whatever.” Steve tried to look very seductive; it was pretty dark in Bill's bedroom so he hoped it kind of worked.

“Are you serious?”

“I don't know, just let me do it.”

“Uhhh. Okay. If you want.” Bill kinda looked like he was expecting Steve to whip out a pocket-knife and stab him in the neck or something if he turned around. He sure knew how to make a guy feel romantic.

Steve climbed up on top of him; Billy had a really nice back too.

“Stop moving,” he commanded.

“I’m not.” Bill squirmed like a fish and put his face in the pillow. He shifted around some more when Steve started working on his shoulder.

Bill was so weird about stuff sometimes too; Steve was used to it. Sometimes it was like he couldn’t even touch Billy unless they were hooking up or whatever, sometimes even then. He was always wriggling away and squirming and then making jokes about it. Steve didn’t know if it was just because he couldn’t sit still or if it was like he was expectin’ to get hit all the time or something. “You’re really tense.” Bill had a knot on his shoulder roughly the size of Lake Michigan.

“No shit.” Billy was trying to get away again but he had nowhere to go since Steve was sitting on him. He was acting like Steve was real crazy for, like, wanting to touch his boyfriend’s back or something. He made a funny sound when Steve pressed harder against his shoulder-blade.

“What, s’it hurt?”

“No. I don’t know.” Bill wriggled some more and then grunted; Steve was going to get a boner or something.

Hmm. That was happening now. “Stop moving,” Steve told him again.

“I’m not!” Somehow he managed to lay still for a couple moments; Steve reached out and brushed the hair off his neck. “Ahahaha,” Bill said like a nut. “How come you know how to do this shit?”

“I don’t know, when I did swim team we’d have to help each other stretch out and stuff.”

Billy lifted his face up off the pillow for a second. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, what? You never had to do that for basketball or something?”

“Uh, no, I never had to rub a bunch of guys in their underwear or their bathin’ suits before,” Bill told him. “Think I woulda figured

some stuff out a lot earlier.”

He made Steve laugh. “Welcome to Hawkins.”

“Shit, man,” Billy said. Steve rubbed his shoulder for a while longer, about ten minutes, and then Bill decided he was ready for round two (Steve felt really proud of himself). Whee. Steve finally got to use his lube which meant they both came embarrassingly fast. That was okay since his arm was already tired.

They laid together on the bed for a while. Billy wasn't squirming too much anymore; Steve guessed his batteries were winding down. “I never really used that stuff before,” Bill told him.

“It's fun.” There was other stuff they could do with it but since he wasn't super horny anymore Steve wasn't gonna bring all that up right now.

“Mm.” Bill tucked his face against Steve's neck and Steve got to put his arms around him. Steve liked this part a lot, the part after they'd hooked up or whatever and then he got to just lay around and hold Billy. Sometimes he liked it even more than the actual sex, he thought. Okay that wasn't true, but this part was really nice. “Hey, sorry about tonight,” Bill said.

“What do you mean?”

“I dunno. Thought you'd wanna go out or something, you ain't gonna be around.”

Oh. Huh. “I liked watching the movie,” Steve said. Really any time he got to hang out with Billy and eat a bunch of food he was happy. That was probably super boring or something.

“Couldn't really think of somethin' you'd wanna do. I'm not, uh, I'm not good at thinkin' up shit like you are.”

Steve felt like laughing for a second; he and Bill had only been out on, like, actual dates or whatever a few times. Each time it'd taken Steve about forty hours (a whole work week!) to figure out what they should do or what Bill would want to do. “Uh, do you even like it when we go places?”

"Sure. Of course," Bill said all gruffly into Steve's neck. "Sorry. I ain't good at that stuff."

"Uh, that doesn't matter," Steve told him. He was totally going to take Bill to a bunch of places now, he decided; he was definitely going to take him to Lake Michigan. He'd already talked to Aunt Mary the other week and she'd said Steve could take his friends any time in August. "I just like bein' around you."

"Okay. Me too."

He played around with the chain of Billy's pendant for a couple moments. It always got all tangled around the back of his neck or in his hair when he was laying down. "What are you gonna do for the rest of the week?"

"I dunno. Go to work. Smoke all my dope before Friday, I got the kid comin' over here." Steve still kind of couldn't believe that Billy was going to be watching Eleven for the whole weekend, or that Hopper wanted him to. He'd forgotten where Bill had said that Hop was going.

"Yeah, what are you guys gonna do?"

"Braid each other's hair, play ponies," Bill told him like an asshole; he made a stupid face when Steve laughed. "What, if she wants to."

"Shut up."

"I dunno, she does her own thing anyway. Give her a comic and cook like two things for her, she'll be fine."

"I can leave my car here for you if you want," Steve told him. He'd been thinking about it on the way over.

Bill laughed like Steve was being funny again. "Yeah, that's okay."

"It doesn't matter, it's just gonna be sitting there for like four days."

"My car's okay," Bill said like he hadn't just told Steve it was going to be in the shop earlier.

“Yeah, but you don't like driving it anymore.” Maybe that was the wrong thing to say; Bill didn't answer him for a while. “How are you gonna get to class?”

“Take the bus.”

“Just take my car,” Steve told him; Billy grunted. “What, you don't like my car anymore?”

“Sure I do, it's a great car,” Bill told him right away. Steve guessed he'd found Billy's weakness. He could feel Bill shifting away beside him; he was chewing on his lip. “How you gonna get home in the morning?”

“I drove my dad's car over here, remember? Just go pick my car up after work or whatever. I'll leave the keys out for you, or with my mom or something.”

Bill didn't answer him for a while again. “Yeah, I dunno.”

“You're making a big deal out of this, just say okay. What if you need to go somewhere?”

“I dunno,” Bill said again. He sounded kind of hesitant or small or something. They were pressed pretty close together since Steve still had his arms around him; he put a hand on Steve's hip. “Your mom ain't gonna think it's weird?”

“She won't care, she likes you,” Steve told him. Steve had let Tommy borrow his car a bunch of times before and Mom definitely hadn't liked him. He was pretty sure that if Mom *did* know about him and Bill the only reason she wasn't freaking out was because she liked Bill. She never liked anybody that Steve brought around. “It's not a big deal,” he said again.

“Okay, I don't know.” Bill sounded grumpy but he wasn't shifting away anymore and grumbling or anything. “I ain't giving Henderson any fuckin' rides anywhere.”

“That's okay.”

“I won't scratch it up or nothin'.”

“Okay,” Steve said again. “Are you done being weird? I’m tired.”

“I guess,” Bill said. Steve fell asleep with Billy snoring in his ear.

Steve woke up before Bill did which wasn't unusual. He held onto him for a couple minutes more and then got up and got dressed. It was a Wednesday morning but it was still kind of weird without Max around making a racket; Steve swore the kid never slept. He made himself some coffee and sat around at the table thinkin' his Steve-thoughts.

Bill came out of his room a while past seven with his hair sticking out all crazy. He rubbed his eye looking at Steve. Chewy was trotting around his ankles meowing; she'd probably been under the bed all night again. “Coulda woke me up, I gotta go in and talk to Hank.”

“I forgot.” It was still too early; Steve could only say a couple words before eight AM.

“MIAW!!!” said Chewy.

“Fucking shit.” Bill huffed over to the window and threw it open. Chewy scrambled out and climbed down the fire escape Steve guessed. She was kind of like a dog or something; Steve didn't know how Max and Bill had trained her to go to the bathroom outside in a couple weeks.

Bill leaned out the window smoking a cigarette. He was wearing his jeans already and his old black hoodie that had the skeleton face on it. “Are you tryin' not to smoke in the apartment?” Steve asked him.

Billy turned around and looked at him like he was dumb. “There's a dog at the park,” he told Steve.

“Oh. Right.”

Bill leaned out the window again. “Hahahaha,” he said. “Oh, shit.” He turned back to Steve. “It's two dogs,” he said happily.

“That's great,” Steve told him. Bill was really cute or whatever.

"Guy downstairs has got two collies," Bill told him. "I seen this husky down the street the other day, I been waitin' to meet it."

"I'm sure you'll be great friends."

Billy flipped him off. He watched the dogs for a while longer as Steve drank his coffee, then he went into the bathroom to get ready. He came back out and started digging around in the kitchen cabinets. He found a pack of Poptarts and tore them open. "You stayin' here for a while?"

"Uh, I'll probably leave right after you go. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, sure." Billy stood leaning against the counter and stared at him. "Supposed to rain in Chicago all week, you pack a sweater?"

"What are you, the weather man?"

"Fuck off, it's gonna be cold," Billy told him. Sometimes Steve forgot that Bill was from California where like sixty degrees was cold. "You should take my jacket." His jean jacket was on the hangin' on the chair next to Steve.

Steve stared at him. "What, really?" Bill stared at him too. "Are you serious?" Bill never really let anybody wear his jackets, even Max when she complained. Once he'd let Steve wear his leather jacket when Steve'd been really drunk.

"Sure, why not?"

"Uh, I dunno. I didn't think I was that special." Billy started grinning like an asshole and Steve rolled his eyes. "Fuck off." He put the jacket on and shrugged his shoulders. "How do I look?"

"Like a fuckin' loser," Billy told him lovingly.

Steve rolled his eyes again. It was kind of exciting or something; Bill was always real weird about his clothes. "Do you want the stuff that's in the pockets?" he asked him.

Bill was trying to fit the whole Poptart in his mouth. "Nah, that's for you," he mumbled. "Was gonna give it to ya last night, I chickened

out.”

“Uh, okay. What is it?” Steve reached into the pocket to pull it out; it was like a little box or something that was wrapped up. *Oh*, he thought like a moron. “Did you make me a tape?”

Bill looked like Steve had shot him or something. His eyes got huge for a second and he reached across the table to shove at Steve's arm roughly. “Don't fuckin' take it out while I'm standin' right here, wait til I go, asshole!” he said. “Jesus God!”

“Oh, my god, okay.” Steve was trying not to laugh at him. Bill acted like such a little kid sometimes. Steve guessed that he kind of got it or whatever – it was like when somebody opened a Christmas present in front of you and you were real nervous. “Sorry.”

“Whatever, you ain't sorry.” Bill looked really grumpy. He leaned down and kissed Steve with the Poptart in his mouth; it was cherry. “I gotta go, I'm gonna be late.”

“Is that what you were doing the other night?” Steve asked him; Bill looked even grumpier.

“I dunno, I don't remember. Have fun, okay? Don't forget about me.”

“Yeah, like I could.”

Bill rolled his eyes and put his hands in his hoodie pocket. “Bye.”

“Bye.” Steve watched him go.

He sat around for a while longer, feeling the tape in the jacket pocket and feeling like a big dope. All the records and shit from the other night made sense now, also Max being totally weird. He kind of felt like an asshole for a few minutes. He guessed maybe there had been a part of him that'd really thought Billy had been sneaking around or doing something weird, but he'd just been doing something nice for Steve.

Steve washed out his coffee cup and put it on the counter to dry. He emptied out Bill's dishwasher too, since he had time, then he pushed the couch back to his normal spot. Chewy was standing around at the

little door by the kitchen staring at him and getting rained on; Steve guessed it was okay to let her in. He locked the door behind him when he left.

Somehow he managed to keep from tearing into the pockets of Bill's jacket and looking at the tape until he made it to his car. He probably looked like a little idiot, walking down the street with a huge grin on his face – he almost walked into a mailbox anyway. It was nuts. Nobody had really made him a tape before.

Nobody had really made a tape for him before but Steve had made a tape for somebody else once, a long time ago. It'd been the first girl he'd ever slept with, this chick named Stephanie Saunders. She'd moved away a couple years ago; Steve thought her dad had gotten transferred to Indianapolis or something.

Even thinking about it now made Steve feel kind of embarrassed, okay majorly embarrassed. He'd had World History with her freshman year and he'd had a huge crush on her for forever, for almost three months or something. Carol'd made friends with her because she'd been awesome like that and she'd told Steve at the end of the year that Steph thought he was, like, totally cute. He'd made Carol and Tommy hang out at the community pool with him all summer so's that he could see her a couple times a week (Tommy had bitched his head off each time and complained that Steve had a fucking pool at *his house*). Steph had been kind of a punk girl or whatever, actually maybe kinda like Bill if he was really small and a cute chick.

They'd hung out a couple times at Steve's house and had kissed or whatever. They'd finally slept together one afternoon in August when Steve's parents had been at work; Steve had had no fucking clue what he was doing. Afterwards he'd been real excited or whatever – he'd never had a real girlfriend before. He'd spent all weekend workin' on this mixed tape for her and thinkin' about songs that made him think about her. He'd even been going to get her flowers but Carol had moaned her head off and begged him not to do that.

Steph had been kind of weird with him the next week when he'd come over to her house; Steve could tell like right away that she hadn't even really wanted to let him in or anything. Maybe he'd been

real bad at sex back then. She'd got even weirder when he'd given her the tape. She'd told him that he was cool and all but she didn't really want a boyfriend or whatever. School was starting again soon, she'd told him. She'd thought they were just having fun.

Steve had felt like a huge moron with his stupid tape that he'd wrote the names of all the songs on. He still remembered how dumb he'd felt, and kinda hurt too he guessed. He'd been really glad Carol had talked him out of the flowers. *Sure, having fun, totally, that's what I wanted, too*, he thought he'd said like a dope. He remembered he'd said, *Uh, I just wanted to make sure you didn't feel bad or something*.

Steph hadn't felt bad but Steve had definitely felt bad; he'd spent the rest of the summer laying around and cryin' about it to Tommy and Carol. They'd told him he was way better off, anyway – *Steve and Stephanie, it was too cute for words*, Tommy'd told him. Carol had gone around telling everyone that Steph was a big slut until Steve had felt shitty and told her to stop. He'd only talked to her a couple times that next year anyway. Sophomore year had been a big year for him – he'd made the basketball team and had grown like three more inches. He'd gone around with a lot of girls that year, he remembered. He'd gone around with a lot of girls until he'd met Nancy.

Anyway, that had been a real long time ago though. Steve guessed he didn't really need to be thinkin' about all of it; somebody had finally made him a tape and it'd been Billy. He made his way down the street and unlocked his dad's Lexus. He turned the car on and pulled the tape out of his (Bill's) jacket.

There was a housekey in the pocket too; Steve stared at that for a while. It was sparkly and had a baseball bat on it – Steve guessed it was for him. Bill thought he was too hilarious. He turned the key over a couple times and then put it in his jeans' pocket; he'd have to make sure not to lose it. He took the tape out and looked at that too.

It wasn't really wrapped or anything like he'd thought. That would be way too much for Bill, Steve guessed. He'd written Steve a note or something in Sharpie marker and folded it up around the cassette. It was super wrinkled like Bill had crumpled it up a bunch of times.

Steve smoothed the paper out and read it. Bill's big blocky

handwriting took up like half the page.

Hey Steve bet you didn't think I'd really make you a tape. I know you thought I was doing some shit. Quit thinkin I'm gonna fuck around on you, it's gonna make me mad, asshole. Mrs Byers has got like every Genesis record. You guys should talk. Hope you like it. I tried to put on a bunch of corny shit I thought you'd like or shit that made me think bout you. Max made fun of me real bad for the smiths song but I dont give a shit. Have fun in the city. Love you so call me Friday. Billy

Jesus Christ. Steve couldn't believe he was going to have to keep a stupid piece of notebook paper for the rest of his life or whatever. He read the note two more times, then folded it and put it in his suitcase. He definitely didn't need to leave it in here where his dad could find it later.

He turned the tape over a couple of times and then slid it into the cassette player. 'Owner of a Lonely Heart' by Yes started blaring as he put the car in drive. He probably looked like a total moron or an idiot grinning away at seven-forty in the morning. It took about three hours to get into the city; Steve listened to it a couple times.

It was a really long rest of the week; the meetings were way longer than two hours like Joanne had said. Wednesday and Thursday everybody went out after and Steve got back to his hotel room so late that he barely had any time to do anything but sleep. He called his mom once and he got Dust on the phone too. His hotel room was weird and too big and had too many windows. It was dumb because he was in the city and in a place he'd never been to before, but he kinda just wanted to be back in Bill's little room. He missed Billy and his hot grin and his stupid donut boxers.

Steve always felt really boring tellin' people he worked in an office but his dad's company was a pretty big deal. Bill and Dustin had asked him about it a couple times but Steve wasn't even sure they knew what all he did there or why it was kind of important.

Steve's dad had started some kinda furniture-shipping company when he'd been in his thirties – Steve was pretty sure that his grandpa had helped set it up or whatever. It was office furniture which was super exciting. The thing was that his dad exported from a bunch of different companies so you could basically get whatever you wanted from just one place; apparently he'd been the first business to ever do that so it had taken off pretty quickly. They had four different offices already and Dad said by the time he was sixty he wanted ten.

The business meetings were to sign in new clients which meant that Steve's dad talked a lot and everybody had to look like he was real important, then Dad drank a lot out in the lobby while Linda did all the paperwork and charmed everybody. There was so many people around all the time that Steve barely had to talk to his dad at all; that was nice.

Steve *did* have to act really polite the whole time and look super honored or whatever when a bunch of old dudes told him he'd be lucky to take over the company one day. It always felt super embarrassing whenever anybody said shit like that to him. Steve didn't actually want to take over the company; that was the last thing he wanted to do really. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He couldn't imagine sucking up to a buncha business men every day or sitting behind a desk for the rest of his life.

Wednesday and Thursday after the meetings Joanne and Linda made Steve go sight-seeing with them in the city; they ate a lot of pizza (it was really good like everybody said). It rained almost the whole time and Joanne told him he had a cool jacket. She had a yellow raincoat on and looked like a ten-year-old. Steve bought Max and Eleven giant stuffed animals at a really fancy mall.

Friday sucked a lot because Steve had to go out to dinner with his dad. Dad brought his secretary Marisol which made things super awkward because she was Dad's Other Woman. Now Steve could finally say he had met her. She had a lot of blonde hair and she laughed way too much; she was nothing like Steve's mom. Really he would rather have been at a strip club.

Steve left as early as he could and took two cabs back to his fancy hotel. He felt tired and he wanted to eat chicken nuggets. He passed

by Linda and Joanne at the hotel bar and they made him come over and sit with them; Linda said they were trying every cocktail on the menu so Steve figured he'd help them. It was the city and he had a business credit card so no one ID'd him.

Linda gave him an appletini and then two tequila sunsets and Steve felt okay. He wasn't going to fall off the stool even though Lin said he was going to fall off the stool. He guessed he hadn't really drank in a while.

"I cannot believe your father brought *that woman* to the conference, are you okay, baby?" Linda asked him.

"I think so. You don't need to call her that, she has a name," Steve said. Linda's nails were really pretty; Steve held her hand and looked at them.

"*Marisol*," Linda whispered like a curse word. She fanned her hand out and let him look at her nails. "Is it really true, Steve? He always tells me he's such a Catholic."

"I dunno what kinda Catholic he is, I heard them on the phone together when I was like thirteen," Steve told her; he thought he'd wanted to call Tommy or Carol or something. It'd been like eleven at night.

Joanne gasped. "Are you serious? Oh, my god. Did you tell your mom about it? Is that how she found out?"

"She already knew about it." Steve thought that maybe the second tequila sunset (sunrise?) hadn't been too smart. "Uh, you can't say anything."

"Please, I would never. You know my dad has cheated on my mom like four times, once she threatened to go over the balcony," Joanne told him.

"Jo, he doesn't need to know all about that," Lin said.

"I'm just saying! I wouldn't tell this to just anyone!"

"My mom wouldn't do that, she's a praying – uh, pragmatist," Steve

said.

“Okay, we’re not gonna talk about that, we still got four more drinks to go through.” Lin patted his head. “Maybe you should go to bed, baby.”

Steve was not a baby, he was an adult, and in the city. He’d taken two taxis today, in the last two hours. King Steve in the city. It was so dumb. “I’m fine,” he told her. “I gotta make a phone call tonight.”

“Are you gonna call your sweetheart?” Linda asked him. She poked the side of his neck. “I see they left you a present, what happened to you?”

Jesus H. Steve wasn’t sure if he was turning red or if the alcohol was hitting him really hard. Maybe both. “We got in a fight, then made up.”

“Oh, that’s the best part, isn’t it?” Linda had this horrible smile on her face.

“Oh, let me see!” Joanne steadied his shoulders and inspected him. “Golly,” she said. Her eyes were real big. “Your girlfriend’s got a big mouth,” she said; Linda spit out her drink.

“Leave him alone, you know how the kids are.” She leaned over her drink menu. “Steve, what’s in this whiskey thing?”

“You’re asking the wrong person,” Steve told her. Billy would know. Steve missed Billy. Billy loved him (probably). He’d made Steve a mix tape.

Linda ordered three of the whiskey things anyway; they all drank them and Joanne bitched about how Craig had called her room four times today. He was probably calling right now, she said. Steve was pretty sure he managed not to say anything else that was super dumb.

Joanne and Linda sent him off to his room. Linda made sure that he had his key-card like four times as if he was a little baby or something. He almost lost it anyway once he’d gotten upstairs.

Steve drank some water and then flopped out on his fancy hotel bed until he felt less drunk and more like a human person again. The clock said it was only past ten but it felt really late. It was Friday and Bill had wrote *Love you so call me Friday* so Steve called him. He didn't really even expect him to pick up and he was prepared to be in a sulk about it.

Bill answered on like the third ring though; he sounded like he was eating something. "Yello."

"Hey, it's me," Steve said.

"Hey man!" Bill actually sounded kind of excited or something; that was really nice. "Whatcha doin'?"

"It's raining here," Steve told him. "Are you at a party?"

"Sure, it's a real party, I got like three fourteen-year-olds over here." Bill sounded real cranky.

"Do you really?"

"Whatcha doin', you finish all your shit today?"

"Oh, my god, is that Steve? HEY, STEVE! HI!" Dust said over the line.

"Yo, my fuckin' ear!" Bill said.

"HEY DUSTIN!" Steve said too. He felt kind of emotional; he wondered if Billy had been letting Dust play the Nintendo. He could hear the sounds of the apartment and the kids talkin' and Bill yellin' and he actually missed everybody real bad, even Max who was probably bein' a super-bitch out in California. It almost made his heart hurt or something.

"Man, the fuck," Billy grumbled. "Shit, are you drunk or somethin'?"

"No." Steve thought about it. "Not anymore. I miss you."

"Sure, I miss you too," Bill said real easy. He sounded like Steve was being funny again; Steve didn't mind. "You go out somewhere?"

"I was at the hotel bar with Linda and Joanne, did I tell you about Joanne?" Steve asked him.

"Yeah I heard 'bout Joanne." Billy sounded real grouchy; Dustin was laughing a lot in the background. "What you wearin'?" Bill asked him like a huge pervert.

"Oh, my god, gross! Billy!" Steve heard two or three Monster Squad members squawk. He guessed Lucas was over too, and El must be there.

"Ignore that, what you got on?"

Bill was funny. Steve looked down at himself. "Uh, I am wearin' this shirt that my mom bought me, Dustin says it makes me look like the ice-cream man."

"Nice, I want a Rocket-Pop," Bill told him; Dustin screamed.

"Oh my god, can you go to your room if you're going to talk like that?"

"FUCK YOU, IT'S MY PLACE!"

"STEVE! CONTROL YOUR MAN!" There was a weird sound, possibly of Dust being throttled. Someone else was laughing, then El screamed and laughed too.

"Hang on a sec," Bill said all out of breath.

The line fuzzed over a couple times. Steve drank his water. Finally after a million years (four minutes) Bill got the phone back. "Okay, I got rid of Henderson and Sinclair. Why'd you tell 'em they could watch the TV over here?"

"I didn't. What's El doing?"

"Eatin' cookies on the couch. We did a lotta math today."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I'll live. You get my stuff?"

“Yes, I really liked the tape,” Steve told him seriously. “I listened to it three times. Is that key really for me?”

“Sure is. Now you don’t gotta scream at me anymore.”

“I don’t do that. Did you go and get my car?”

“Yeah,” Bill said shortly. “Your mom talked to me for like twenty frickin’ minutes.”

Steve wasn’t sure if he should feel scared or not. Mom hadn’t said anything to him about Bill the other night. “Really? What did she say to you?”

“Dunno, she was talkin’ to the kid. We got invited over for Sunday.”

“Oh, okay.” That was all right Steve guessed.

“What you been doin’?”

Steve told Bill about all the business meetings and the paperwork and the pizza and dinner with his dad. “He brought his, uh, he brought his secretary today, I had to eat dinner with them.”

“Shit, man, are you serious?” Bill asked him. “What, that chick he’s been with ‘stead of your mom?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You okay?”

“I think so.” Steve thought about it; he should care a lot more about what his dad was doing but he didn’t. He’d already spent most of the last week being upset about stupid stuff and he didn’t need more stupid stuff. His mouth tasted sour. “Hey, what’s in a whiskey sour?”

“Whiskey.” Billy sounded like he was being funny. “That what ya had?”

“Linda ordered it for me,” Steve told him. “The bar here is really fancy, it’s made of glass and shit.”

"You ain't even told me what place you're staying at." Steve told him the name of the hotel; Billy said, "Shit, man."

"It's pretty nice. They have fish in the fountain downstairs, they don't let you pet them."

"Did you try to pet the fish?" Bill asked him.

"No," Steve lied. That had been mostly Joanne anyway; she was like a kid.

"Okay." Billy sounded like he had his Steve-smile on his face. "You coming back tomorrow?"

"Yeah, we have to have lunch with a bunch of people, then I get to leave."

"Come over and see me."

"I might be kind of late."

"That's okay," Bill said. "What you gonna do in your swanky hotel tonight? Thought you'd be out really late."

"It is really late," Steve told him. "Do you think they would bring me chicken nuggets?"

"Place like that, I dunno, man."

"You would like the TV here, it's mounted on the wall. I was gonna try and get a video earlier, they got like a whole rental place here." Steve fluffed up his fancy pillow (it had feathers in it) and jammed it behind his head.

"Should rent a porno and charge it to your dad."

Steve snorted. "Yeah, I wish. They probably don't have any ones with just guys in them or what though."

"Do they really got those?"

"Uh, here? I dunno, maybe." Billy didn't say anything and it made

Steve feel pretty weird. He had to know about that stuff. "Yeah, Bill, they got all kinds of stuff."

"Really?" Bill sounded like a kid too which was funny because they were talking about porno tapes. Steve kind of wanted to laugh but somehow he stopped himself. Billy's dad was crazy and Bill had said before that he could barely keep regular tapes around when he'd lived at home. Steve guessed he really wouldn't know a lot about gay porn or whatever.

"Yeah, of course they have those. Do you really not know about it?"

"How would I know?" Bill asked him.

"I've seen one before." Steve wondered if he was still a little drunk.

"What, with two guys in it?"

"They had like a regular couple and stuff too," Steve told him. "There was two guys too. I watched it like four times."

"Shut up."

"What, I did. Somebody left a bunch of tapes when I stayed at the mountains with my parents," Steve said. He added confidentially, "I did not watch them with my parents."

"That's great," Bill said. "Did you really watch that shit?"

"Sure, I was like fifteen, I wasn't not gonna watch it. Why, you think it's too dirty or something?"

"No." Bill didn't say anything for a long time; Steve was used to it. "So what they do?"

Steve laughed. "Uh, you know."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure we was just talkin' about how much I don't know."

"Okay, I'm sorry."

"I ain't mad."

He felt kind of stupid again. The room was really hot or something; his face felt sweaty. "Do you really wanna talk about this right now?"

"When else we gonna talk about it?" Bill asked him; Steve guessed he had a point. Heh. He wondered if they were about to have phone sex or something. Maybe he should take his belt off.

"I don't know." He tried to think; he'd watched that dumb tape a really long time ago. He actually didn't even remember that much, just the way it'd made him feel. "They just had sex and stuff."

"Okay. So some guy just grabbed a dude and stuck it in 'im?"

"Um, no." Billy was so dumb. You couldn't just *stick it in*, if you were with a guy or a girl or what. You had to get each other ready first. "They did other stuff too. Like what we do," Steve told him.

"Okay."

"You know there's, uh, there's more stuff we could do."

"Yeah, I know that." Bill sounded weird; Steve couldn't tell if he was freaking out or not. They'd kind of fooled around before, but they hadn't really gone too far or whatever. Billy could barely let Steve rub his back for ten minutes; Steve didn't know if Bill even thought about, like, doing anal sex with him or anything. "What, you wanna finger me like a girl?"

Okay maybe he had been thinking about it. "You're not a girl."

"Thanks, I know that."

"Uh, we could do that stuff if you want," Steve told him. It was actually harder (heh) havin' to say this kinda stuff to Billy on the phone; he felt real embarrassed or whatever. "I mean, I could do it to you, or uh, you could do it to me." *Or I could do it to you*, Steve said again in his head.

"Okay."

Bill was givin' him a lot to go on like usual. "Not if you don't want to."

"I'll do whatever you want," Bill told him. Yep, the room was definitely way too hot.

"It'd be okay if you don't like it. We could just try it."

Billy laughed a little. "Uh, pretty sure I'd like it." Whee. "So you gonna tell me about it or what?"

"What, you really wanna know?"

"Sure, you're the experienced one. Gotta tell me so I know what I'm doing."

"Okay." Steve thought about it. "Actually it was kind of romantic."

"Jesus Christ. You would say a fuckin' porno was romantic," Billy grumbled; Steve laughed.

"It wasn't like a real crazy one or whatever. Uh, is your door locked?" Steve asked him.

"Shit. Hang on." The line fuzzed over like crazy, then there was a muffled crash. "Okay, I'm good."

"Did you just jump on your bed?"

"No," Bill lied. "Go ahead."

"Okay, um. So everybody's on vacation, right? I think they were at, uh, a lake or something."

"Wow, man. That's really beautiful," Bill said.

"Uh, am I allowed to talk or what?"

"Go ahead," Bill told him again; Steve talked for a while.

13. Chapter Thirteen

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy leaned against the counter and tried not to start screaming hysterically. He probably looked like a goddamn kidnapper or something, and Jane still kinda looked like she was gonna cry. Shit. He wished he was still at home in his apartment thinking about gay sex.

Chapter Thirteen

Max went back home to California on Wednesday night. She cried her damn head off sayin' bye to her moms and to Billy as if she hadn't spent most of the springtime goin' around bratting and snotting about how she couldn't wait to go out and see her old man. Susan cried too; overall it was a thoroughly terrible experience. Billy wished he'd brought his book or somethin'.

He wasn't sure why he'd even gone along with the girls but Susan had asked if he'd wanted to drive them so he'd driven 'em. He hadn't exactly wanted to take them but he hadn't wanted to say *no* either. They was acting like Maxine was getting shipped off to fuckin' Thailand with a goddamn dowry instead of just out to LA for six days.

Susan crying so damn much had made Billy feel pretty bad he guessed. He'd said okay too when she'd invited him back to the house to have dinner with her. Sue wiped her eyes off with her tissues and they watched out the big window as Max's plane took off into the sky, then Billy got to feel like a big dumb asshole as he drove Susan's crappy Ford Explorer back to Hawkins. The engine was making a weird sound already; Billy told her he'd come over next week and check it out.

Once he got back to his old man's place he didn't feel bad anymore – he felt weird as fuck, actually. Sue had promised him that his dad

was out on the road all week and so he wouldn't be comin' around, but Billy felt kinda nervous the whole time he was there anyway, like his old man was gonna bust in at any minute. He could imagine the fuckin' tirade his dad would go on if he came home and saw Billy eating lasagna and chatting it up with his stepmom after he'd booked it out of there two months ago without even saying he was moving. It'd be a pretty big fuckin' tirade.

Sue didn't feel weird as fuck, Billy guessed. She was good at doin' her mom act even if she wasn't *his* mom. He guessed she wanted to check up on him or whatever; maybe it was okay for her to do that. She blabbed on and on about her job and then Max's job, then she asked him a buncha annoying questions: how his work was and how his class was; what all he was doin' on the weekends, hopefully not too much dope; how Steve was; and was Billy washin' his laundry at least once a week.

She sent him off for home with a plate full of crappy food and a new Stephen King book. Billy wasn't sure how she knew he ain't read *Pet Sematary* yet. The cat on the cover kinda looked like Chewy. Not that Billy was calling that stupid fucking thing by that stupid fucking name but anyway.

Billy went home and read his book and listened to the radio. He guessed he actually kinda missed Steve real bad even though he was tryin' not to be that way. It wasn't like they were fucking married. Seemed like Harrington was over at his place now about half the time anyway – on another Wednesday Steve might not even be here, but since he was actually gone on his big trip for work, Billy missed him. They'd had that stupid fucking fight last week and he still felt like a prick; he'd thought about Steve on the drive back home from Sue's place. He read *Pet Sematary* until Part Two where shit was gonna go down and went to bed past midnight. He left the kitchen window open in case the stupid cat decided to come back in.

Thursday he stayed late at work talkin' to Hank and his brother. They both seemed to find it hilarious that he was gonna be watching his sister's friend for the weekend and Billy felt kind of insulted. He couldn't really tell 'em *well we got locked up in a warehouse together so we got lots in common* he guessed.

It was raining out and nobody had come in since before four o'clock. Billy was sitting up front at the counter writing out invoices under the supervision of Miles; Hank was puffing away moving boxes of random crap from the front of the shop over to the garage. He kept on bashing his hip on the counter as he'd walk by.

"You know you gotta feed a kid and talk to 'em, Bill," Hank told him like a total dickhead. "Ain't like a gerbil or a hermit crab." Hank thought he was too goddamn hilarious.

"No shit, I know that, asshole."

"Billy's got that little cat, he knows how to take care of something," Miles said; Billy wasn't sure if Miles was defending him or teasing him. His shirt was purple and had flowers on it. Billy was trying not to look at him really.

Billy tried to remember if he'd actually fed the damn thing last night anyway. "It ain't my cat," he said; Hank cackled at him as he huffed by with a buncha rotors. Billy watched him waddle back and forth. "Fucking said I'd move that shit for you."

"I'm done anyway, Bill." Hank puffed by again on his way to the garage.

Miles tapped at Billy's paper. "Base rate fee, too," he said.

"Oh right." Billy added it in.

"That's good, you'll get it. You know if you can work the front by yourself and charge people, we don't even have to come in here at all," Miles told him. "You won't have to hear anything *all day*."

Yeah right. "Don't tease me," Billy said.

"Do you know how to make change?" Miles asked him like he was a fuckin' three year old.

Billy chewed on his lip for a couple seconds so's he wouldn't make a comment. "Yeah, I worked at a grocery store before."

"Oh, okay. I didn't know that."

“Even talked to people sometimes.”

“You don't say,” Miles said in fairy delight; Billy laughed.

Hank came back over from the garage, wiping his hands off on a rag. “Bout a hundred goddamn degrees out here, you think it's gonna rain again?”

“It better not, I have a date,” Miles told him.

Hank pointedly ignored him; he looked like he was gearin' up to go on and on. He mopped his sweaty forehead off with the rag. “Hey, Bill, I ain't know Hopper had another kid, I know ya heard his little girl died about ten years back.”

Billy hadn't heard that, actually. He sat at the counter lookin' at Hank. “I didn't know that.”

“Really? Oh, yeah, yeah. He adored that kid, used to take her around to all the barbecues. You know Hop used to be like this real friendly guy,” Hank told him, blabbing all the chief's business. “Hey, Mi, you 'member little Sarah?”

“Sure do, she was a sweetheart. She had eyes bigger than the moon.”

“Came through here for Halloween one year, chief was paradin' her about,” Hank said.

That made Billy feel weird as shit. “How'd she die?”

“Leukemia, think it was. Couldn't of been older than six.”

“Oh.”

“Was goddamn awful, she was out at that big hospital up in Mercer County,” Hank told him. “Chief used to come out to the bar and I'd buy him a couple drinks, I remember those nights. Steelers won in '79,” he added; Miles made a face at him. “I guess his old lady stayed up there with her overnight. Know they got divorced after that shit. It's rough times, yanno?”

“Do you run a gossip column?” Miles asked him; Hank swiped for

him across the counter and Miles cackled.

"I'm just fuckin' tellin' him, you prick!"

"We didn't know he had another little girl, guess she'd be a bit younger."

Billy felt kinda put on the spot or something. He didn't know what all Hop had been tellin' people about Elijane. He knew he'd been takin' the kid out more and all.

He took his time answering. "Think she's like his relative or somethin'. Like he took her in, you know."

"Oh, uh-yuh, he would do some shit like that." Hank puffed by again with his papers. "Fill out your time-sheet for me for tomorrow, okay Bill?"

"Okay."

Hank headed out for home at quarter-past five and Miles got up to go back into the office while Billy cleaned up the front. "You doin' okay, kid?" Miles asked him.

He'd been asking Billy if he was okay practically every time he'd seen him since Billy'd came back in June. It made Billy feel kinda weird; he was pretty sure he'd never exactly been nice to Hank's brother.

"Sure," Billy said.

Miles leaned with his elbows on the counter. His bracelets jingled; Billy raised his eyebrows but managed not to make a comment again. He guessed he really couldn't say too much about that shit anyway. "You know we worry about you."

"Oh yeah, who's 'we?' You and Elton John?" Billy asked him.

Miles looked positively delighted by him; Billy felt annoyed. "Yeah, me and Elton, my brother too."

"Said I'm good."

"You talk to your father since you moved out or anything?"

Billy wondered why they was havin' some big conversation about his life. He stretched out across the counter and showed Miles his arms. "You see any bruises on me?"

"You're a riot, you little smartass."

"Thanks," Billy said. "I'm good, my stepmom checks up on me," he told Miles.

"Sure, I heard about her. Pretty lady." Billy gave him a look and Miles sparkled some more. "What, I'm allowed to say that." He laughed at Billy's face. "Okay, okay, I'm leaving you alone, I'm not bothering you. I know you can only say like forty words a day, you hit your quota yet?"

"Whatever, man." He totally said more shit than that. It wasn't like he and Hank's brother had a bunch of shit in common they could blab on about. Maybe one thing. Ha ha.

Miles made a big production out of going into the office and leaving Billy alone. He started killing Billy and playing the radio like usual. They'd been playin' a lot of Michael Jackson on POWER 99 lately; Billy guessed he had some new record coming out. Sinclair had said last week that Michael Jackson was for the birds because he wanted to be a white guy. Billy'd said that 'Beat It' was a good song though; Sinclair said *I guess*.

Billy filled out his time-sheet with his hours for the week and then spent a while cleaning up the front of the shop. He bashed his hip a couple times on the goddamn counter too. He wondered again if Hank'd let him move around some shit up here.

At a little after six a car pulled up in front of the shop and the driver honked their horn; Miles fluttered out of the side office and locked it up. He put his horrible jacket on over his horrible shirt.

"That your boyfriend?" Billy asked him. He almost didn't ask him.

"What?" Miles looked up from buttoning his horrible jacket. "Oh no, no. When we're in Hawkins that's my *good friend*." He made air-

quotes at Billy like a nerd.

“What, he ain't coming in here?”

Miles sparkled at him and Billy rolled his eyes. “Do you wanna meet him?” he asked like a horror.

“Nope.” Billy glared out at the car. Miles was smiling at him like he was real hilarious. “What's he got, a Plymouth?”

“It's a '69.”

“Bet it is,” Billy said; Miles laughed. Anyway Billy was pretty sure it was a GTX. He'd love to get his hands on one of those. If he said that he bet Miles would make eighty gay jokes though; Billy had been at work too long today to deal with that. “Nice car.” It was red too of course.

Miles looked like he was bein' even funnier. “Don't stay here too long, Bill.”

“Bye,” Billy said. He stood there like a creep and watched through the window as Miles ran out in the rain and got into the car with his *good friend*. Couldn't tell if the guy was hot or whatever. From the shop they just looked like two regular guys. They both waved at Billy through the window all nerdy so he flipped 'em off. He swept up the shop floor and then locked up.

After he left work he got to go home and be by himself in his apartment some more. He spent a while talkin' to the stupid devil cat like a moron and getting the place cleaned up for Jane to come over tomorrow. It still felt weird without Max around and without Harrington around but it was all right.

Actually maybe it was kinda nice to not be fuckin' talked to death for once (Devil Hellbitch couldn't answer him). He liked Steve talkin' all the time and he guessed he liked Max talkin' too, but they made him forget that he'd been on his own so much before. He didn't have to go nuts trying to avoid his old man all the time anymore so he felt okay by himself, mostly okay anyway.

Once he'd cleaned up he went into his room and got his papers and his books out for Harrington that he'd been hiding. He'd stuffed them in the bottom drawer of his dresser along with the file-folder that the chief had gave him last month; he didn't need to look through all that shit right now though.

Harrington was a grade-A procrastinator too. Billy'd stole his Indiana State application back almost two months ago, the first time that he had been over at Steve's place again since they'd gotten back together or whatever. Steve hadn't even squawked about it being missing yet. He probably hadn't even fuckin' noticed; Billy guessed he'd been keeping Harrington pretty busy after all.

Steve got so fucking dumb about this college shit. He obviously wanted to go to school and all since he'd made such a big fuss about it back in April and ruined Billy's spring break being a prick to him. He always acted like he was too goddamn stupid to get into a goddamn state school which wasn't true; Billy'd met a lot of assholes way dumber than Steve Harrington.

That shit didn't matter anyway. Harrington could do whatever he wanted. If you really pressed him over it, Billy guessed he might say that he wasn't too excited about Steve goin' away to school in a couple months, but Steve needed to go. It just seemed like he really needed to go; he hated working for his old man and shit. Maybe he wouldn't forget about Billy right away or whatever.

Anyway Billy figured he could just fill out the papers and write the essay for him and be done with it. He could whip up an essay in a couple hours so it wasn't some big thing. It could be like a surprise or whatever. Then if Steve didn't like it he'd have to write his own goddamn paper. At least he'd send his shit out though.

Billy turned the radio on and got one of the local bands playing on the college station. He sat sprawled out at the kitchen table with Steve's papers and the stupid fuckin' yearbooks Henderson had got for him; he'd needed to know what year Steve had done what sports and shit. The yearbooks were Nancy Wheeler's yearbooks and Billy was beyond thrilled to have her crap in his house. Not. It'd been a couple days and so far he'd managed not to set them on fire yet.

Billy was pretty sure that Henderson and Wheeler Jr had just hawked 'em off of her anyway. Wheeler Jr had said that they were just in the basement and she never even looked at them.

He hadn't even really needed the books and it seemed totally dumb now. Four mornings a week he went running with Dustin and he'd told the kid that he wanted to finish Steve's college papers before August; Henderson had gotten all overeager as he did and said he'd get Billy the info.

Granted he and Henderson didn't talk about too much shit but they'd both agreed that Steve got totally fucking dumb about the college shit. Billy had figured that Dustin would just ask Harrington about it, but Henderson said that Steve'd gotten all weird though when the kid had tried to get his books off him. Billy could just bet that Henderson had asked about them in a real suave way.

If Billy had a normal fucking boyfriend or whatever he wouldn't have to sneak around doing stupid crap like this just to figure out what year Steve had been on the fucking swim team. The couple times he'd brought up Harrington goin' off to school or whatever, Steve *had* got all weird about it. He definitely hadn't filled shit out all summer. So here Billy sat like a little nerd in his apartment, writing an essay and talking to his stupid cat. Okay not *his* cat but whatever.

Billy spent a while going over the front pages of the application. He didn't mind doing the paperwork 'cause he got to think about Steve while he did it. He knew Steve pretty well so he knew his birthday and his middle name; Harrington'd have to put in his social security number and get his transcripts together from the high school and all. Who fucking knew how long it would take him to do that shit.

Devil Hellbitch zoomed under the table to attack the laces of Billy's boots; Billy kicked at her a little and she jumped back and splayed her paws like he was playin' with her.

"What you want?" Billy asked her; she stared at him with her one murky eye. He scuffed his boot at her and she circled the table. "Come on, man, fuckin' fed you already."

Devil Hellbitch jumped up onto the table and looked at him some

more. Cats always tilted their heads to the side like they were cute shit. Nobody was around so Billy patted her warily two times and kept on going through the yearbooks. "You see this crap?" he asked her; Jesus God Steve had been skinnier than Wheeler Jr his sophomore year.

"Mrrrp!" said the cat.

"Fuckin' right."

Billy flipped through the yearbooks. Steve had done football for two years and basketball for three. He'd been on the swim team all four years; his stats were okay. Harrington had even been on the yearbook committee for the first half of his senior year. Billy could guess what little princess had convinced him to do that.

He didn't exactly mean to snoop through Nancy Wheeler's yearbooks but since he had her fuckin' yearbooks he was gonna snoop through 'em a little. She and that Barbara Holland girl had wrote all over her ninth grade year book and had drawn a buncha crap all over people they didn't seem to like. There was a memorial page for the chick in '85 and '86 too.

Steve'd wrote some huge love letter for Nancy in the back her sophomore year book; it was three fuckin' paragraphs. Steve kinda wrote the way Billy envisioned a drunk spider would if it could hold a pen. His sloping uneven handwriting took up more'n half the page, and he'd signed his name with a big flourish. Jesus fucking Christ he'd even drawn a goddamn heart underneath it: Steve was so queer and soft.

Billy looked at the note for a couple of minutes, not really seeing the words. It was just interesting, you know. He let himself read the last four lines.

I feel so lucky that you gave me another chance after every thing that happened. These last few months with you have been amazing. I'm so glad that we found one another. I love you Nancy.

Jesus God. Billy closed the book up (the cat stared at him). He felt all embarrassed or something reading that shit. He didn't know what it

was; it actually like made his stomach hurt. That'd ended up so great for Harrington. He felt bad, too – Steve'd be so ticked off if he ever knew Billy had read that shit. He might be ticked off enough after he found out that Billy'd even wrote his paper for him. He just knew Steve and he knew he'd be real embarrassed.

He didn't exactly feel jealous or nothing. Well of course he did; that wasn't really something that went away even though he tried to make it go away. Billy was pretty sure that if Harrington had still been goin' around with Nancy when they'd started hanging out, he wouldn't have had a shot in hell with Steve. Even now he still kinda didn't understand how it'd worked out so well for himself and all.

Either way Billy was even more convinced now that Nancy Wheeler was the dumbest bitch he'd ever met in his life. She was so fuckin' stupid – Harrington would do just about anything for somebody if he cared about 'em. She'd had herself a goddamn sweetheart with pretty brown eyes and a huge amazing dick who wrote her nice shit like that and she'd fucking tossed him; Steve probably woulda married her or some shit. Anyway now Billy had him. He really did.

For about an hour he worked on the essay and let himself feel stupid about Steve. Steve had done a lot for him too; Billy could write the essay.

It was easy to write it because he already knew what he wanted to say. It wasn't even like some big question, just a couple hundred words on why you wanted to go to the school. He'd meant to do this shit last weekend but then he and Harrington had gotten into that big fight; that'd been Billy's fault so he'd had to lay around and drink beer and pet the cat all weekend instead of doing anything fucking productive.

Anyway he remembered that shitty essay Steve'd made him read back when he'd been trying to get into Huntington. It wasn't like Harrington didn't have good ideas or whatever. He just didn't know how to write them down. It was kinda fun to write like Steve and act all earnest and shit; Billy got a big kick out of writin' like Steve and sayin' some corny shit like he was trying to find his place in the world. Angela Davis had applied to like eight schools and her older brother'd said that the colleges ate that shit up.

The phone rang twice while he was writing and Billy jumped for it both times anyway like a fuckin' nerd: the first time it was Max calling with a status update and to bitch about her dad. Her plane had landed safely and she'd eaten cold pizza two times already. Sounded like home.

"Did you feed Chewy?" Maxine demanded of him at a level six. "Put her on the phone!" Billy didn't. Max yapped at him for about twenty minutes about how bored and miserable she was and Billy finally managed to get her off the line.

The second time the phone rang it was just Hopper buggin' him for the eightieth time this week. He kept calling to make sure that Billy was still cool with Jane staying over at his place for the weekend; he asked Billy how much money he wanted for watchin' her and Billy didn't know what to say to that.

"Doesn't matter. I don't need nothin'."

"She eats a lotta junk," Hop said; Elijane said, "No I *don't!*" all indignant in the background.

The chief was going out to Lawrenceville for some big police conference or whatever; he'd told Billy he had to go two or three times a year. It wasn't too far but Billy guessed he couldn't really bring the kid and all. Mrs. Byers was working all weekend and anyway Jane had said she wanted to stay at Billy's. He still wasn't sure why the chief seemed to be trusting him with his kid, but he guessed that once you got abducted with somebody for close to a week you had creds or some shit.

Billy told Hop it was cool for the eightieth time. He wrote Steve's paper some more until he got tired and decided he wanted to read his book instead. When he finally went into his room and laid down, it still took him a while to fall asleep. He guessed he missed his *good friend* or whatever.

Friday morning the cat was eating out of the trash like a goddamn dog. Billy kicked her out for the day and went off to the park to meet Henderson like he usually did. Henderson was wearing blue running shorts and had his transistor radio slung over one shoulder; Billy

almost went right back on into the apartment.

Dustin had his huge backpack with him too and he grinned at the horrible face that Billy was making. "You look so happy already, did Steve call you last night? He got you a present."

Billy felt like a sulky bitch; Harrington hadn't called him for shit. "He ain't call me."

He felt all fuckin' stupid again thinking about Steve for two seconds. He'd spent all night on Monday with Max making this dumb tape for Harrington; it'd taken them all goddamn night. Billy'd written him some corny fucking note because it seemed like the kinda sappy shit Steve would like. He felt massively retarded about the note now; he'd almost thrown it out twice. He'd written *Call me Friday* on it but he probably should have wrote *Call me whenever*. It'd only been two days or whatever. Steve might be havin' fun with his work-people and he probably wasn't thinking about Billy too much.

Henderson had a annoying smile on his ugly mug. "Wow, what, do you really miss him too much? Don't worry, we talked about you."

"What he say about me?"

"That's confidential," Henderson told him like a little asshole.

Jesus God. "Okay, no talkin'." He started pushing Dustin around until he started running.

"Oh, my god, STOP HITTING ME! I'm not talking, you asked me a question!"

Billy pushed him around some more. They went around the park a couple times (Billy lapped him twice) and then Henderson laid down on the ground like a fucking moron; that usually signified he was done for the day.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," he announced. His face was pretty red.

Billy leaned over and clapped him on the shoulder, then he hauled Dustin to his feet. "Stop, stop, I can't breathe!" Henderson

caterwauled all dramatic.

“Yeah, you're all right.” Two weeks ago Henderson hadn't even been able to make it around the fuckin' block one time; Billy had a new route planned for next week. He bet he could trick Dustin into running up and down the stairs a couple dozen times. Maybe he could dangle a chocolate bar with a fishing pole or something. Haha. “You did pretty good, looks like ya lost a couple pounds already.”

Dustin gazed at him wide eyes; he was all sweaty and he had two bright pink spots on his cheeks. “Please don't hit on me, Billy,” he lisped solemnly.

Fucking Christ. Billy thought up eighty ways to kill him on the spot. “Later, asshole.” He took the kid's radio and started heading back to his apartment.

“See you tonight!” Henderson called to his back.

“No, ya ain't,” Billy told him; Henderson laughed like a loon.

Jane was in a real bad mood. Billy didn't know what to do with her.

She'd been in the mood since yesterday afternoon when the chief had dumped her off at the shop. Hank had let her sit up front and he'd let Billy go early at four-thirty. Even Miles chattin' her up at the counter for two hours hadn't cheered her up.

Mind you Billy wasn't like some kinda womanly expert or whatever but he guessed he knew the kid well enough to tell when she was in a bad mood – was the same way he knew Maxine was pissed off without even havin' to talk to her. Eliane had said about twelve words to him since yesterday and she'd smiled maybe twice; she was making him feel weird as shit.

Billy wondered if maybe she missed Hopper or if she was homesick or whatever. The chief was basically like her old man anyway. It wasn't really something Billy thought about, you know, missin' your old man, but she was still just a kid after all.

Once he'd got off work he'd taken her to the arcade so she could say her tearful goodbye to Wheeler Jr (Billy had already forgotten what lame-ass place Wheeler'd said he was goin' away to on vacation); they'd stayed there for about an hour or so. Hop had given him a buncha money so Billy'd got her an ice cream too, then Steve's mom had fussed over her when they'd gone to get Harrington's fancy ride.

He'd even let Henderson and Sinclair come over to keep her company at his place (Henderson had said that Steve'd told him he was allowed to play the Nintendo). That had seemed to cheer her up for a while, but now it was the next day and she was actin' all glum and shit again.

When Billy came out of his bedroom on Saturday morning to get ready for class she was still laying all crashed out on the couch where he'd left her the night before. He stood in the hallway lookin' at her for a couple seconds, then walked out into the living room.

"Hey, you stay out here all night?" he asked her; she sat up a little and stared at him. "Told ya you coulda slept in Max's room." Maxine had made some big production about washing her sheets earlier in the week and getting her room ready. She'd left El her best teddy bear too.

"I fell asleep." Jane followed him over to the kitchen.

Oh right. Billy remembered he was supposed to feed her actual food and shit. Okay. He could make something. "You want eggs or pancakes?"

She just stared at him with her big eyes. "My stomach hurts."

"Prolly fed you too much shit last night. You know how to work a coffee machine?"

"Yes." She wandered over to the fancy coffee machine. Her curly hair

was stickin' up in the back; she looked real small in her grey HAWKINS PD shirt.

Jane made him his coffee and then set the table like a little weirdo while Billy busied himself at the stove. Even Max didn't set the goddamn table. He decided she could have eggs and pancakes since that was what he wanted. He tried to do the fun shapes like his mom had done for him when he'd been a kid.

Jane stared at him some more when he put her plate down in front of her. She stared at the plate. Her little mouth made a funny shape. "Why does it look like that?" she asked him.

Billy felt kinda offended, really. "It's Mickey Mouse!" he told her; she just looked at him all unimpressed. "See, you got the ears and shit. Got your mug." He nodded at her cup of orange juice; she had Donald Duck on it.

"Oh," Elijane said. She had a weird look on her face, like Billy was totally nuts or something.

Jesus God. You try to be cute for one goddamn minute. Billy sat down across from her and tried not to feel like a fuckin' jackass. He guessed she was too old for that shit or whatever.

Oh well. He'd tried. Billy drank his coffee.

Jane poured some syrup over her pancake. She cut an ear off and looked at it in deep contemplation, then stuffed the whole thing in her mouth.

"What's the verdict?" Billy asked her.

"It's good." She ate the other ear.

"There ya go."

Billy ate his food too. She was still making him feel kinda weird or something. Normally one of the things he liked best about Elijane was how little she fucking talked, but he guessed he'd thought maybe she'd be ... happier to be over at his place. She was always here otherwise. Harrington was probably comin' back tonight and Billy

figured they could get movies or somethin'.

He'd always thought that like he and Jane didn't even really need to talk or whatever; maybe she wanted him to talk more or something. After all she wasn't a fuckin' gerbil or a hermit crab.

"You gonna be okay while I'm at class?" he asked her.

"I think so."

"Take ya if I could." Somehow he didn't think bringing a thirteen-year-old to his welding class was exactly a smart idea.

"That's okay. I'll probably sleep more."

"We can do something fun later, you can pick," Billy said; she just shrugged at him. "What you wanna do?" She shrugged again. "You know Steve don't gotta come over here later. We can just do somethin', you and me." He *really* wanted to see Harrington but he guessed more than anything he was in charge of the kid this weekend.

"No, it's ... okay. I don't mind."

"What's up with you, you miss the chief?" he asked her. She made a face. "Miss Mikey."

"I *guess*."

"He'll be back next week." It was almost August; everybody was on vacation it seemed. Even Byers was off doin' his thing at camp.

"I know."

Okay. Billy ate his pancake.

Elijane sat in silence and watched him eat. That made him feel kinda weird too. Billy was fairly sure he wasn't, you know, a pretty eater or whatever. He wasn't really used to eatin' breakfast with somebody like this; Max didn't count. When Steve stayed over they were usually rushing around and stuffing their faces at the counter in the morning.

Finally Jane looked down at the table all serious. “What are your books for?” He'd never put 'em away from the other night.

“School stuff,” Billy told her. “Yearbooks and shit.”

“Isn't your school over?”

It wasn't really over since he was goin' to class in about twenty minutes. He knew what she meant though. High school or whatever. “These ain't for me, I gotta fill out Harrington's college papers. You know what college is?”

“After high school. Like what you're doing.”

“Uh, kinda.”

She picked up one of the yearbooks and looked at it. “It's Steve's book?”

“Nope.” She looked up at him so Billy guessed he had to talk more. “He don't really know I'm writin' his stuff for him. I gotta know what years he did sports and shi – stuff.”

“Can't you just ask him?”

Billy ate his eggs. “Nah, he doesn't think he can get into college.”

“Oh. So you're just going to do it for him?”

“Yep.”

“Are you supposed to do that?”

“Nope.” Billy ate his eggs.

“Oh.” She just picked the book up again and started lookin' through it. She almost brightened for a second. “Pictures.”

“Yep,” Billy said brilliantly again. He pushed the hardcover one that said 1987 in gold lettering on the cover over to her (Henderson hadn't even needed to fuckin' bring that one). “Think the goon squad's in there.”

Elijane picked that one up too. She studied it for a couple moments and then looked back at him, not saying anything again. Billy started gettin' this weird buzzy-dizzy feeling in between his ears, like before when she was always trying to go through his head. Kinda felt like a snake or a slug squirming around in his brain. "Hey, don't do that *shit*, fucking ask me somethin' if you wanna ask me something."

"Sorry," she said in a small voice. The buzzing feeling went away after another second. Jesus God. He hadn't meant to cuss at her. "I didn't –" she stopped. "I really want to go to school," she told him.

Billy tried not to make a face. "You ain't missing much."

"Dustin said I still act too weird."

Henderson was such a little shit; he never knew when to shut his fucking mouth. Billy was gonna throw him all over the park on Monday. "Oh yeah, you listen to him? You think he acts frickin' normal?"

Jane didn't answer him. "He says I don't – know enough stuff. Mike thinks that too. They act like I'm ... a baby or something."

Billy was pretty sure Wheeler Jr didn't think she was a baby. He shuddered to himself. "You can go to school, man," he told her. "That's what it's for, teaches you shit. Stuff," he amended.

"That's not ... what they mean," El told him all upset.

He didn't really understand. "Okay, what you doin' with your tutor?"

She shrugged at him all moody; usually she liked tellin' him about her books and whatnot. After a long time she asked, "Can you help me write a com-pound sentence later?"

"Sure can." They'd done more fractions last night before Harrington'd called him up and started with all his sexy-talk.

Anyway Billy didn't need to be thinking about that now; he was gonna get himself all flustered and shit again. Jane helped him put their plates away and then he left her on the couch again and went off to class.

It still felt weird to drive Steve's rich-boy car. Harrington had let him drive it before but Billy'd never been alone in it or whatever. He felt like he was gonna get fucking pulled over, like somebody was gonna just look at him and know that he wasn't the kinda person who should be driving a fuckin' BMW.

He tried not to go too fast on the Interstate even though he really wanted to. His car was great and all but Harrington's drove smoother; there was no kickback when the gears shifted. The other night Billy'd said *My car's okay* and Steve'd said back *Yeah, but you don't like driving it anymore*; that wasn't exactly true.

Billy loved his car and he loved driving it – he'd saved up for a long time to buy it and he'd paid a lot to fix it up; he'd done most of that on his own, too. The Camaro was his and for a long time it had been the only thing that'd really *been* his. No matter what kinda shit he pulled his old man had never taken his keys away; that was Billy's car.

He guessed he'd always felt real safe in his car before, like nobody could fuck with him when he was in the Camaro. Nobody could get to him when he was in his car.

Obviously that wasn't really true. He guessed it just didn't feel the same anymore. So it was okay or whatever if Harrington wanted to let Billy borrow his car.

When he got out to the community college Kasia was sitting on the hood of her busted-up Cavalier wearing one of her crazy outfits and smoking; Billy parked real close to her to be an asshole. Once he got out she teased him about his fancy Beamer and then grinned like a stupid goon when he told her it was Harrington's.

“Oh yeah? So you're not fighting anymore?”

Billy hadn't known what to do last week; he'd felt like a fucking piece of shit. He almost hadn't gone to class. Kasia'd told him he was being a prick over nothing; Billy already knew that. Kasia'd said, *Well, you either have to trust him or not*. She'd made it seem so simple. “Yeah, we talked.”

“See? I told you.” She was peerin' into the backseat like she was at an auto auction. “Totally thought you'd be going out with somebody with like a muscle car.”

Truly Billy felt insulted. There was more to goin' out with somebody than their stupid car. Their huge perfect cock was important too. “Yeah, something wrong with my guy's car?”

“No, of course not. I mean, costs more than my sister's tuition.” Kasia tapped her fingernails against the hood of the Beamer. “What's your boyfriend do to have such a nice ride? What is he, like actually a forty-year-old lawyer?” She looked up and laughed suddenly at his face. “What, I didn't say it was bad!”

Jesus God. “He's my age, asshole,” Billy said and then thought maybe he shouldn't call her that; she just laughed some more though. “Parents bought it for 'im.”

“Ohhh, okay.” She started poking at the side-mirror like a weird person. “Okay, yeah, I know everything I need to know about this guy already.”

“No you don't,” Billy told her right away.

Kasia swatted him. “I'm just teasing you! Okay, officially my party's in two weeks, are you still gonna go?”

“Yeah, I'll go.”

“Okay, what about Steve? I want to see Steve. My girlfriend wants to see Steve, my roommate wants to see Steve. The dog wants to see Steve.” Kasia had an old greyhound; she had a picture of him wearin' a little sweater in her wallet like a crazy cat lady.

Billy didn't even fucking talk about Harrington that much. “You really want me to bring him?”

“Bring whoever you want. And you don't have to feel weird about it or anything.”

He guessed Kasia thought he was some kinda wilting queer flower or something. He didn't really feel weird or anything, not about going to

a fucking house party with Harrington. Well actually he hadn't been to a goddamn party all summer and he felt weird about *that*.

Half of class was the lecture and takin' notes and then for the other hour-and-a-half they got to actually do shit. They were finally getting to use welding guns like what Hank had at the garage so Billy already knew a little. Actually a lot of the shit at the shop was way nicer than what they were learnin' on but Billy definitely wasn't going to act like some bougie asshole about it. Anyway he was probably having way too much fun; next week they were gonna get to use plasma cutters.

He couldn't really stay and hang out after since he wanted to check on the kid. Class cut out at a little before noon and Billy made it back to Hawkins in under a half hour. He parked Steve's car down at the end of the block so it wouldn't get dinged up and went back on up to his place.

When he got back inside Jane was still an immovable lump on the couch; this time with Max's stupid Care Bears blanket around her and the dumb cat on her lap.

Billy guessed it was time for another amazing conversation. He leaned over the back of the couch and looked down at her. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yes."

"You wanna go somewhere?"

"No." She tilted her head back and gazed at him all critical. "You smell funny."

Billy narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, I was meltin' stuff in class for two hours." She didn't answer him. "Okay, I'm going."

He went and took a shower; he washed his hair twice so's he wouldn't smell like metal shavings or smoke or whatever anymore. It'd been a couple days so he spent a while shaving his chest and his junk. Tracey'd asked him to shave his chest once when he'd been like sixteen and now it was just easier to keep it that way. Shit got so itchy. He guessed he liked to look a certain way or whatever too.

He'd barely gotten dressed again before somebody was knockin' at the front door; Jane didn't move at all so Billy rolled his eyes and shambled over. When he got the door opened up Sinclair was standing there with a weird look on his face.

They both just stared at each other. Sinclair put his hands in his jeans' pockets. "Hey, can I hang out here for a while?"

Billy looked down at him for a couple seconds and didn't answer; he guessed he didn't know what to say. He thought that he and Sinclair had been cool and all lately but they didn't exactly go out of their way to try and hang out.

He'd been tryin' to be nice to the kid; it wasn't that hard. Even so it wasn't like they were great buddies or anything and Billy never knew what all to talk to him about. Sinclair wasn't like Will and he wasn't like Henderson either or even Wheeler Jr. Billy could never think up any shit to say to him. *Hey, remember when I threw ya into a bookshelf so you kicked me in the balls? Hey, what about when my dad tossed you around my yard and told you you were a fuckin' spade? Remember when I called you a – yeah.*

They had such a great history and all. He had no clue why the hell Sinclair'd want to hang around his place, especially with Maxine gone and all.

"I guess," Billy said. He opened the door a little wider and Lucas walked on in. They stood there like two dopes for a moment. "My sister send you to check up on me or some shit?"

Sinclair looked disgusted. "Yeah right," he said. "I just thought I'd watch the baseball game here." He hesitated. "Uh, if that's okay."

Oh. That was all right, Billy guessed. Sports were okay. "Yeah, whatever you want."

"Yeah? Really?"

He didn't need to act all surprised; it felt like there was a goddamn kid here about every other day anyway, and they definitely didn't fuckin' ask to come over. Billy thought he was downright hospitable.

“I don't care.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Lucas looked weirdly relieved and closed the door up behind him. “Man, Erica had a stupid sleepover last night and there are like *forty* annoying little girls at my house, I was literally about to go crazy.” Billy still didn't know who Erica was. Sinclair turned to the couch. “Hey, El.”

She turned away from the TV and stared blankly at him. “Hi.”

“Whoa, it's *just* me, you don't have to get so happy,” Sinclair told her, making a face. He was such a sarcastic bitch; Billy got a kick out of him.

Lucas hopped onto the couch and El handed the remote to him. Billy got himself a glass of water and went back over to the table to finish Harrington's essay. He listened to the kids talk for a few minutes.

Sinclair was explainin' the ins and outs of baseball to Jane; she didn't seem too interested. After a couple minutes he got up to get her a soda. He stood there holding a Coke and looking into the fridge all awkward.

Billy licked his lips. “Lucas, you can have a fuckin' soda,” he told the kid.

“Right. I was just – “ He rifled around in the fridge some more.

The phone rang and they both stared at it. Billy looked at Sinclair too.

Sinclair made a face. “Yeah, I'm not answering your phone for you,” he told Billy like Billy was being funny.

Billy grunted. What good was he. He got up again and went around the counter to answer the line. “Yeah?”

“Hey, Billy.” It was Maxine and she still sounded all bummed out and shit.

Billy leaned against the counter and glanced over at the clock on the microwave. It was barely past one which meant it was only about ten

AM out there in Cali. Max was checking up on him early today; either that or she was bored as hell. She should be out doin' a buncha shit. "Hey, man, how ya doin'?" He said to Sinclair, "It's Max."

"Who are you talking to? How's El?" Max demanded in two seconds.

"Got Sinclair over here," Billy told her. He ignored her question about Eliane.

He could just about see the face she was making. "What, *really*?"

"Safe and sound and *not* at Melanie Van Zandt's party," Sinclair said all droll; Billy tried not to grin.

"What's he saying? Why's he over there?" Maxine yapped.

"Must've missed me too much."

"Yeah, right," Max said immediately. She was gonna get him feelin' insulted. "Let me talk to him!"

Jesus God. Billy handed the phone over and Lucas went back to the couch with it. He blabbered on to Max for a couple minutes and then handed the phone over to Eliane.

El held to her phone up to her ear; she was staring at the baseball game on TV like a robot. "Hi," she said. "Yeah," she said in a monotone. There was a long pause. "Yeah," she said again.

She was such a little charmer. Billy sighed internally for a million years and turned back to his papers. He read over what he'd written the other day and crossed some stuff out. After a while Sinclair wandered over again and gave the phone back. He stood next to Billy's chair for a couple seconds and then leaned with a hand on the table, looking down at the papers.

Billy put the receiver up to his ear and cradled it against his shoulder. He wrote a new sentence in the page margin. "So what you been up to, you do anything fun yet?"

"Not really." Maxine still sounded all glum and shit; it made Billy feel bad.

"Thought you was goin' to Pacific Park today."

Max hummed discontentedly. "Dad had to work."

That was for shit. "It's Saturday," Billy told her. "Hang on." Sinclair was still leaning over his shoulder and reading Harrington's essay; Billy lolled his head back and glared at the kid. Lucas yelped like a cartoon and zipped back over to the couch. "Okay," Billy said back into the phone. "So what you gonna do, sit around all day?"

"I don't know." She didn't even sound all sassy. "I wish I'd brought my board. Dad's new neighborhood sucks. I don't even have a bedroom here, he just made it into an, an office. Mom said I'm supposed to have a bedroom!"

Billy didn't know what all to say to that. "Hey, you guys went out last night, right?"

"So what?"

"Thought you was goin' to a fancy restaurant."

"*I guess*," Maxine said in her womanly sorrow. "It was *too* fancy, he just wanted to show off. They didn't even have chicken nuggets!" The horrors; Harrington would have a freak-out too. "I hate it here, Billy. I knew it would suck! I wish I could just come home early."

"You only got like three more days. We can do somethin' cool when you get back."

"I guess," she said again. "What are you doing? Are you okay by yourself and everything?"

Maxine was such a bleedin' heart. Anyway he wasn't really by himself; he had the scintillating company of Sinclair and Elijane right now. "Yeah, man, I'm good."

She started firing off her questions. "Are we still gonna go camping next weekend? Did you guys figure out where? Did you talk to Steve yet? Did he like the tape, did you tell him we had to talk to *Jonathan*?"

“I didn't – “

“Are we still gonna go? I don't even have a tent, and we *need* to get a radio. Does Steve even know how to start a fire? Maybe we should just go camping in like a parking lot, the Kmart parking lot!”

Billy laughed, probably too much. “He knows how to make a fuckin' fire.”

“Well, okay. I don't know. I might DIE BEFORE THEN ANYWAY, SO IT DOESN'T MATTER.” Max went on and on; Billy started on his closing paragraph. “Dad's stupid girlfriend won't leave me alone, she will *not* stop *talking* to me.” Max talked and talked. “We're going to go to the mall soon, she said we can get our *nails done*.” Her voice dripped with scathing disgust.

“Yeah, sounds kinda – “

Max babbled on, interrupting him. “Hey, what's wrong with El, she's being even weirder than usual. Did you yell at her or something?”

“No, I didn't fuckin' yell at her,” Billy said too loudly; Sinclair glanced back at him from the couch. Jesus God. Jane was gonna go and tell the chief that Billy was a horrible babysitter or whatever and to never leave her over there again and Billy was gonna feel like total shit. He lowered his voice a little. “Guess she don't feel good or something.”

“Maybe she misses Hopper.” Max yapped on for a couple more minutes; Billy leaned back in his chair. “Can you call Mom or go over there and check up on her for me? Like – like Monday or something. If you have time.”

“I seen her already, went to the house on Wednesday.”

“Yeah, but she's lonely!”

Billy lamented his life. “Yeah, I'll go over.”

Max yapped and yapped; she couldn't believe she was missing Steve's fancy family party tomorrow. She was kinda cheering him up and he hadn't even known that he'd needed cheering up. “I wanted to see how you guys act around his mom, it would be so good.”

"You're such a bitch, Max," Billy told her.

Max ignored him callin' her a bitch. "No one's around anymore, it totally sucks," she complained. She paused for a couple seconds. "Hey, do you think Tracey still lives over on Mercer Street?"

Billy felt surprised and then he felt weird. He hadn't thought about Trace in a while, even with Max going out there and all. "Yeah, I guess," he said finally. "Why you askin' me?" He hadn't heard shit from Tracey in two years now; she didn't want nothin' to do with him anymore.

"I, I, I don't know!" Max lied; she was so smooth or whatever. "Dad said that he goes to Riverside for work sometimes. I was just thinking about – "

"Man. Don't fucking bother her."

"I didn't say that I was!"

"I'm serious, Max," Billy told her.

She made an annoyed noise at him over the line. "I'm not going to! I was just asking! I mean, don't you think it'd be nice if – oh, hold on." The phone line crackled for a couple seconds. "Sorry, I have to go now, Veronica says we can get lunch. She's a *vegetarian!*"

It was a goddamn tragedy. "Go easy on her, okay?"

"We'll see," Max said darkly. "Call me tomorrow, you have the number here, right?"

"Yeah, I got it." Max killed him makin' him write it down anyway, then finally let him go.

Jane and Sinclair were still watching the game on the TV but they didn't have the volume up too loud. Billy leaned with his head in his hands and watched the TV too for a couple minutes. He thought that he'd feel real shitty and all since Maxine had mentioned Tracey; that usually put him in some kinda mood. He did feel pretty bad but it went away in a couple minutes.

It was kind of a surprise to let himself realize that he didn't feel shitty about her anymore. Well he'd still been a total prick to her and of course that made him feel awful. But he didn't wanna rip his skin off or jump out a window or, like, beat somebody up over it anymore. Mostly he just kinda missed her now, missed her hangin' out with him. It kinda felt like an ache or an old scar or something, like the way his arm that he'd busted up last year still hurt sometimes. It'd used to feel like a fire.

He guessed he felt okay and all in his place even though he was a fucking failure as a babysitter and Sinclair was drinkin' his last Dr Pepper and the Angels were winnin' on the TV. A year ago Billy never woulda thought he'd still be here, be in Hawkins at all. He didn't know where he'd thought he was gonna go. He worked on his (Steve's) paper some more and then read over it a couple times.

He kept thinking about Harrington and feeling all stupid, like a lovesick puppy or something, or a character in some romantic movie. It was totally stupid. Steve'd called him last night like Billy'd told him to; Billy probably shouldn't be thinkin' about it with the kids around. Harrington had been a little drunk or something and Billy liked him that way. He kept thinking about Steve and the stuff they'd talked about. It was kinda different when you was just talkin' on the phone; you could say a buncha shit you might not say otherwise.

Billy had been thinking about a lot of stuff lately but he hadn't really known if Steve was thinking about the same things. They'd always hooked up a lot and Billy guessed he wanted to go farther. He didn't know if Harrington wanted to do that too or if he even knew about that stuff.

Apparently he did – he knew way more than Billy, actually. It was almost hard to think about because Billy'd made himself not think about it for so long; he hadn't let himself. Steve had watched some fuckin' gay porno tape before so he knew about a lot of shit. Billy wondered exactly when Harrington had been planning on tellin' him this or demonstrating what he knew and all.

Steve had talked for a while. Billy hadn't actually cared that much about what was on the stupid tape or whatever; he didn't care about what the guys on it were doing with each other. He didn't need to

know that the blonde guy in it had been really hot (Billy really fuckin' doubted it actually). He'd just wanted to know what Harrington had thought about it.

Billy guessed that he'd never really thought about too many people like that before. Like fucking them and all, guys or whatever. It was weird to admit it to himself because he wasn't a goddamn prude or something. He knew when somebody was good-looking or attractive, of course, but he'd just never gotten the whole crush thing before or whatever, that stupid feeling you were supposed to get.

People just never registered with him like that; he'd get fucking bored when he was out on a date. He could hook up with people and shit but it was never really fucking magical or whatever, like how everybody always made it seem. He'd always figured he had too much other shit to worry about or something, like he was just surrounded by dumb bitches or assholes. That maybe one day it'd change and then he'd find somebody; well it had changed as soon as he'd seen Harrington in his stupid little gym shorts.

He'd never even gone nuts for some celebrity or whatever either, like how Maxine had been grossing him out the other week and moanin' about how she wanted to stick her goddamn tongue down Corey Haim's throat (at least Billy thought it was that one. There were two of those Corey guys and they both kinda looked the same. Haim was the one that looked like a grasshopper; Billy was pretty sure). He'd never really felt that way before about a girl or a guy; it didn't matter what they looked like. He didn't get hot thinking about being with some random guy or sucking his cock, even if the guy looked like – well, okay, definitely not Corey Haim. He was like twelve. Maybe Keanu Reeves or some shit. That would be all right and all but Billy wouldn't be like drooling for it.

He'd only ever really thought about Harrington, he guessed, or wanted to be with him. He'd *tried* to think about Tracey. He'd gone around with other people before her, too, but it'd never really meant anything; there hadn't ever really been nobody for him. Maybe that made him weird or something. Well he knew it did. Steve had even asked him last week about what kinda guys he was into and Billy hadn't known what to say; it made him feel like a little kid or something. *I like you*. He didn't know if he'd even really be into

watching some porno or whatever. Okay maybe if Steve was there watching it with him too.

It was so weird, even now, to think about Harrington knowing about that stuff, or liking it, or wanting to do it with him. Obviously Billy knew what kinda stuff two guys could get down to; he didn't live under a fucking rock. People made jokes and shit, and it wasn't like it was actually illegal or whatever. Billy *had* known there were tapes and magazines and crap like that. He knew about that kinda stuff. He'd just never really thought about *Steve* knowing about it too.

Billy knew what he wanted but it still seemed kind of dirty or something, like two guys fucking that way. *It doesn't have to be dirty*, Harrington'd told him like some kinda sex guru. *Or I mean it doesn't have to be bad. We could do whatever you want. I mean, I would do it.*

Billy wanted him to do it. Well he thought; he didn't know. He didn't know what all he'd like; he'd never really let himself think about it. He wanted to do whatever Steve wanted, too. Steve. The thought of Steve thinking about that kind of stuff or wanting to do it with Billy made him totally crazy. He wanted that; wanted Steve to fuck him or whatever; he could stick it in.

Steve had said that you didn't just *stick it in*; there was other stuff you could do too. Billy had kinda thought they'd been doing other stuff already but there was way more.

It seemed like Steve had been thinking about that a lot. He'd said you could eat a guy out the same as you could do to a girl; no it wasn't like a blowjob. *Would you want me to do that to you?* Steve had asked him.

Billy'd almost came in his pants like a kid (it wouldn't have been the first time Harrington had gotten him to do that, either). *Uh, maybe if I took a shower first*, he'd said like a fucking moron; Steve had laughed. *I could do it to you too.*

Yeah, if you wanted, Harrington had said. He'd said he'd probably have to shower too. *Probably shouldn't do it on taco night, we should like plan this stuff out. What?* He'd made Billy laugh too.

It was just kinda nice to be able to talk about that stuff or whatever. When Billy'd been together with Trace or with the other chicks he'd screwed around with before her they'd never really talked about that stuff. Obviously that had ended up working out so well.

He was thinking too much: he'd gone from Indiana State to Steve to Steve sticking his tongue up his ass and then back to thinkin' about girls; that was a lot of shit (hopefully minimal shit, hahaha) in a couple minutes. He probably definitely shouldn't be daydreaming about this kinda stuff with his sister's boyfriend and their little telekinetic friend about ten feet away.

Jesus God. Billy got himself back under control. His face was probably all red and he had his head in his hands daydreaming like a fuckin' fairy or something. He stacked his papers up and tried hard to look like he wasn't intensely thinking about gay sex.

The game ended around three; the Angels lost and Billy and Sinclair rejoiced. Lucas put his dorky headband back on and wandered over to the table again. "Thanks for letting me hide out here."

"Yeah, no problem." Billy nodded over at the yearbooks. "Can you get rid of this shit for me?"

"Sure, I've got a key to Mike's house. I have to go there anyway and water his plants." Billy figured Sinclair could've just crashed out and watched the game over there; he didn't point this out though. Lucas leaned over the table. "Hey, is El pissed off or something? She's being totally weird."

"I dunno. She say somethin' to you?"

Sinclair shrugged. "Not really. I guess she has a stomachache." He gathered up the yearbooks and tucked them under his arm. "See ya later, I guess I'll see you when Max gets back."

"Yeah, later."

Lucas left and then Billy was left alone with the little stormcloud that was Elijane again; she had Max's blanket over her head now like a total weirdo. "You wanna play a board game or somethin'?"

“No.”

“Okay. You wanna eat again?”

“I’m okay.”

Okay, well. Billy didn't really know what all to do with her. He felt like he was missing something, like when the fuckin' cat would meow at him as if there was something more he was supposed to be doing. He'd even thought up a buncha stupid shit that a little kid would like but she didn't seem to want to do nothing. He still had Harrington's special edition set of Boggle.

He got his book from Susan and went and sat down next to Jane on the couch. He put the cartoons on for her and just sat there lookin' at her. “Hey kid, we can go somewhere if you want.”

“No. It's okay.”

“Take ya to the mall or whatever.”

“It's too loud.”

Okay. Billy sat and read his book; Jane watched *The Flintstones* rerun. After a couple minutes she got up and wandered off into the bathroom.

Billy read his book. He was pretty sure the old dude he liked in it was gonna kick it; his fuckin' wife had just had a heart attack too. In books and movies they always made ya really like one character, not the main dude, and then killed 'em off in a really stupid way.

There was a loud crash from the bathroom and Billy put his book down. It sounded like something had fallen down or gotten knocked over. He didn't know what to do for a couple seconds; he definitely did not want to check in on the kid while she was in the shower or whatever. “Hey, you okay?” No answer.

After another minute Jane came back out anyway. She had a super weird expression on her face and she looked upset. She came right over to him and stood in front of him lookin' down at him on the couch. Her little shoulders were all hunched up in her baggy t-shirt

and one strap of her overalls was undone.

Billy wondered if there was like a spider or some shit. "You okay?" he asked again.

Elijane just stared at him. "There's blood," she said finally.

He didn't really understand for a couple seconds at first. "What you mean?" He looked her up and down – she wasn't cut nowhere. Maybe he'd left his razor out or something; he hadn't been thinking.

"I ... " She looked down at herself and then back up again. She didn't say anything else.

"You get hurt or somethin'?"

"I don't know."

Billy stared at her some more and she just looked back. Then suddenly he got it; he sat back and nearly fell off the damn couch. "Oh, *shit, man!*" he hollered.

Her eyes welled up in two seconds and Billy felt like a total asshole. "It's bad?"

"Uh, no. No." It was fucking awful actually. Holy shit she'd got her fucking rag. He tried to calm himself down. At least he understood now why she'd been in such a goddamn mood all weekend. "Hey, that's okay, you know, you got your period before and all, right?"

"My ... my period?" Jane repeated blankly; her face looked like she wanted to say *Period of what?*

Billy stared at her. And stared at her. He felt this huge sinking ball of dread in his stomach. "What, this never happened to you before?"

"No."

Jesus fucking Christ. Billy rubbed his face. "Okay," he said.

She still looked all upset and he felt awful. "It's bad?" she asked him again in a whisper.

Billy didn't really know what all to say to her. He looked out at the little window in the living room and considered it; he was pretty sure the fall from the second story would kill him.

Okay that wasn't really funny. Harrington would come over here later and find his corpse and then he'd find Jane bleedin' all over the apartment and eating frozen waffles like a little savage. Jesus Christ.

"Uh, no," he said finally. He had no fucking clue what to do with her. "Look, your old man never – told you about this shit?" Jane looked totally blank; Billy was going to fucking murder Hopper. "Okay," Billy said. "What about, ah, Mrs. Byers, she ain't ever tell you about – " Jesus God – "sex or whatever?"

El stared at him some more. "She ... told me about ... boys and ... getting pregnant."

Jesus fucking God. That was so fucking great. "She ain't tell you about your period?"

"No."

Billy wondered if he could go out the window again; he really thought about it. He didn't understand how the fuck you could have a thirteen-year-old girl and not tell her about her fucking period. Not that it was like a really high-up thing on his list of shit to talk about he guessed.

He almost wanted to laugh or something – how could she not know? Then he felt like a prick because of course she wouldn't know. He could remember all the shit she'd shown him – back when they'd been stuck together, but before that too. She'd basically been stuck in the same fucking room for her whole life, he guessed. It wasn't like she'd had a fucking family or whatever. She'd even just said *Dustin says I don't know anything*. How the hell was she supposed to know.

Jesus God why the hell did he have to be the one to tell her. Must be some kinda reparations for all the shitty stuff he'd done when he'd been younger. Kinda younger. A year ago. Six months. "Okay," Billy said again. "Uh, don't worry, it happens to everybody." Nope. He was already fucking up. "I mean, it's what girls get," he said a little

hysterically. Most girls he guessed. “Means you can have a baby or some shit.”

Jane looked fucking horrified and Billy figured that was definitely the wrong thing to say. “You ain't havin' a fucking baby!” he said when she opened her mouth. He felt even more hysterical. “You just – “ Shit. “Uh, means you're like a real teenager now or whatever.”

“What do I do?” she asked; Billy stared at her.

“Okay. Uh, hang on.” He got her sat on the couch and then they both just stared at each other some more. “You just gotta – okay. Uh, yeah, I'm probably not the best – hang on.”

He left Jane sitting on the couch like the saddest little zombie and went back over to the phone. He thought about it for a couple seconds – she probably thought she was fuckin' dying. Kid probably needed counseling or some shit. Billy was *not fucking equipped* to deal with this kinda girly crap; he'd thought he'd just fed her too much candy or something.

He picked the phone up and dialed Mrs. Byers. She could probably help him out, Billy figured. The phone rang for a long time and then Jonathan came on the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey, your mom around?”

“She's ... no,” Byers said in a weird voice. “She's at work.”

“She at the store or whatever?”

There was a pause. “Uh, no, she's at her other job out in Mercerville,” Byers told him.

Great. Perfect. Fucking shit. Billy abandoned all hope. He rubbed his face. “Okay,” he said.

“Uh ... is this Billy?”

Jesus God. “Yeah, it's me.”

“Do you need to borrow another record or something?” Byers

sounded like he was being funny. On Monday night when Max and Billy had been making their tape for Steve, they'd had to call up everybody's parents trying to find a fuckin' Phil Collins record; it was serious business. Joyce had said she had every Genesis record so they'd gone over there.

Billy'd had to sit and listen to her talk about some Collins concert back in '81, then he'd had to talk to Jonathan, too, for almost *ten minutes* – he was still recovering from it. Then the worst part had been actually listenin' to the fucking Phil Collins song so's they could record it.

“I don't need a record, I need to talk to your mom.”

“Okay ... “ Jonathan said. There was a long pause. “Is there, like, a punchline or something?”

Billy gritted his teeth together. “No, I seriously need to talk to her.”

“Oh. Um ... yeah, sorry, she won't be home 'til like midnight.”

That was really helpful. “All right, thanks.”

“Uh, are you okay?”

“No, I'm not fucking okay!” Billy told him; he almost yelled really. “Thanks for nothing, asshole!” He slammed the phone down. Useless prick.

He picked the phone up again and called Max too. She was his only hope, like he was Princess Leia and she was his Obi Wan Kenobi. How's that for feminist. Haha. Billy felt like he was going nuts or something.

Max didn't pick up the line though and he hadn't really expected her to; she was probably still out with her old man's girlfriend or whatever. He left her a message anyway: *Yo, Max, you pit stain, call me back!*

He hung up the phone a second time. Jane was still sitting on the couch and staring at him; Billy felt like a prick again. She looked like she was about two seconds away from bustin' out into tears so he

went back over to the couch. “Yeah, you're okay. Put your shoes on, we're gonna go to the store and get you some stuff.” He was pretty sure Max didn't have any of her crap here.

“Okay.” Jane got up and toed her sneakers on; Billy put his boots on too and got his keys. They trooped on downstairs and down the road to Harrington's car.

It was only about a two-minute drive down to the general store; really it felt like the longest fucking ride of Billy's life.

He should definitely be saying some kinda comforting shit to the kid but he didn't know what the fuck to say. Shit he was probably screwing her up even more or whatever. He turned the car onto Main Street and thought up about eighty ways to kill the chief; maybe Harrington would come visit him in the state penitentiary.

“How you feelin'?” Billy asked her finally.

“My stomach hurts. And my back hurts.”

“Yeah, that'll happen,” Billy said as if he fuckin' knew. “My sister never told you about this stuff happenin' to you?” Jane stared blankly again so Billy guessed not. Maxine was fuckin' useless too; he didn't understand how nobody had told the kid about this crap. Max was always blabbin' and complain' about her fucking period to whoever was around to listen; last month she'd even put Harrington off his dinner. “Look, don't worry, okay? This crap's totally normal. It's like a, uh, a good thing.”

Elijane looked at him like he was a moron. “It doesn't feel good.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“What do we need to get at the store?” she asked him; Billy was filled with a new horror.

“They got, like, shit – uh, stuff – so you don't bleed all over your pants. They got stuff for it.”

“Oh.”

Yep. Billy parked the car on the street and waited for her to get out. The one strap of her overalls was still undone; Billy pulled it over her shoulder and clicked the button into place so's she didn't look like she was an extra on *Deliverance* or some shit anymore. "There ya go."

Okay. He told himself not to freak out; he could totally handle this.

They looked up at the general store for a moment. Jane just stood there like a little dope so Billy put his hand on her back and guided her into the building. It was a quarter-past three on a Saturday but it was kinda rainy and dreary out, super cold compared to last summer, and Jane had a long-sleeved shirt on even though it was the middle of July. Anyway it was Hawkins so there wasn't a ton of people around. The bell atop the door jingled loudly when Billy opened it to walk in and the two employees at the counter stared at them.

Billy'd had to go out and do fuckin' supply runs for Tracey before when she'd been on her period so he knew what part of the store to go to. He and Elijane went down the hygiene aisle and then just stood there looking at the huge wall of pads and tampons; Billy felt he was in a goddamn horror movie or something under the fluorescent lights.

"What do I get?" Jane asked him.

"Yeah, man, I dunno," Billy said; he really didn't. There were so *many*. It was kinda overwhelming, he guessed.

Jane picked up a box and looked down at it. She went real still; her little brown eyes widened into huge pools of horror and her mouth formed a straight line. She glanced up towards Billy for a moment and then back down at the box. "*Always?*" she read out in a wavering voice.

Billy felt kinda hysterical again; he almost screamed. "No no no, kid, just once a month!" he told her.

"Oh. Okay." She looked at the package some more. "Is this one okay?"

"Uh, I, I guess so," Billy said, still hysterically.

The kid seemed kind of uncertain or hesitant or something; she stood in the aisle for a long time and looked around at all the different boxes. Billy didn't really have any words of advice for her. He just stood there like a jackass and let her look at everything.

She picked up a box of tampons and stared at that too, for a long time. She turned it over to the back and frowned. "What is this one?"

Jesus God. Billy snatched it back from her. "Yeah, you don't – uh, you don't need to worry about that yet." Holy Christ it was so awful. He was probably already gonna have to say the word 'underwear' to her. If he had to fuckin' teach her how to use a tampon, he'd probably go right on down to the mental institution after. Tracey'd said that you weren't supposed to use tampons until after you'd had sex anyway.

Jane looked totally lost and small holdin' her stupid box of Always and Billy was pretty sure he was being a prick to her. It wasn't like with Maxine where he could just tease her about bein' gross and tell her to hurry the fuck up and she'd say he was ignorant or whatever. He didn't know what to do with the kid and he felt bad. "Okay, yeah, we're gonna need a basket. You pick what you want?"

"I think so." Elijane trailed after him to the front of the store again.

Billy got her some Advil that she could take so's her back wouldn't hurt so much anymore, at least he guessed. He didn't know how it hurt or whatever. He didn't know shit about this kinda crap; he was pretty sure he shouldn't give her a Percocet. Tracey'd always stayed home from school when she got on her rag and a couple times it'd even made her throw up. Billy'd always tried to be real nice to her or whatever during that shit; mostly she just made him buy her stuff and then told him to go away. He felt real bad about Jane feeling sick like that too. "Gotta get you some candy."

"My stomach hurts."

"Yeah, you'll want it later," Billy told her. He was pretty sure that was right. They loaded their shopping basket up with as much chocolate as they could fit and then went over to the check-out counter; the older lady at the register gave the kid this real knowing look.

Billy leaned against the counter and tried not to start screaming hysterically. He probably looked like a goddamn kidnapper or something, and Jane still kinda looked like she was gonna cry. Shit. He wished he was still at home in his apartment thinking about gay sex.

The checkout lady made horrible small talk with 'em as she rang up their shit. "How's your sister doing?" she asked Billy. "She's usually in today."

Billy'd been in the store a buncha times to bug Max or to try and get deals on cigarettes; he didn't really remember this chick but he guessed she looked kinda familiar. He guessed she didn't think he was a fucking pedophile or whatever. "She's okay. She went out to California to visit with her dad, she'll be back next week."

"May I use your bathroom?" Elijane asked all proper.

"Of course you can, sweetheart."

Jane watched Billy count out his money and then they walked on back to the restroom at the side of the store with all their bags. He'd figured she'd just want to use her stuff at home – well, at his place – but he guessed here was good too.

Billy gave her her Always box and two Advil, too. "Do you need, ah – you know what to do?" He felt like a stupid jackass again.

"It says on the box."

"Okay. Good luck." Elijane gave him a withering look and closed the door in his face.

Billy leaned against the wall and waited for her to come back out, took about a million years. He looked down at his sneakers and counted to ten a couple dozen times. Finally she opened the door up and came back out. "Good?"

"I think so."

"All right." They went back down the street and put their bags back in Steve's car, then Billy decided she should get a movie or

something. Jane said okay so he locked up the car again. They crossed the street and walked on down Main to the Hollywood Video, was only about a block away.

Jane went right for the kids' section like Billy'd figured. He spent a while combing through the action movies and trying to calm himself down. After a couple minutes Elijane came over and found him; the tape she was holding had a cartoon mouse on it and Billy lamented his life. *An American Tail*. It was too cute for words. "That what you want?"

"I think so."

"Okay." Billy thought about it; he handed her a fiver from his wallet. "Go pay the lady."

Jane stared at him. *I don't know how*. She didn't even say it but Billy'd *heard* it; he didn't really know she could do that shit anymore.

Jesus God Hop really never let her do anything. Maybe Henderson had been kinda right with whatever stupid shit he'd been saying to her earlier.

Harrington had told Billy that El had run off on the chief before so he didn't know why she was bein' all timid or whatever in the video store. She'd gone off to see her moms and shit, Steve had said, and she'd taken a bus and all, hung out with a buncha punks. Now it just seemed like she was on lockdown all the time or something; she did need to learn more shit.

It wasn't good to be that way, stuck inside by yourself all the time. Billy knew that. "Just give her the money, she'll give ya change back. Say thanks." He wasn't really the best person to be giving any type of advice but whatever.

"Okay." Kid squared her shoulders all determined and slowly wandered over to the checkout counter. Billy watched her pay the chick and then Jane came back with her change. "Is this right?" she asked in her little voice.

Billy was pretty sure he wasn't gonna get short-changed at the fuckin'

dollar rental place but he counted the money out anyway. “Yep, all good. Wanna go back home?” Jane nodded emphatically so back off to Harrington's car they went. He guessed he was pretty glad Steve had let him take the Beamer after all. If Billy had to drive the kid around like this in his crushed up car, he bet neither of them would feel that great.

Once they got back in the apartment Jane just stood there in front of the TV looking around and Billy didn't know what to do again. He realized suddenly like a dope that he probably could have just went and called Susan or brought the kid over there; it probably would have been weird as shit but Sue probably would have done a better job of it than Billy. Plus Jane had that aunt too that he'd fuckin' forgot about. “Hey, you want me to call my stepmom for ya? You wanna talk to somebody? Your aunt or something?”

Jane looked like she was gonna cry which wasn't what he wanted. He didn't know why she looked like that. “No,” she said. “That's okay. I'm sorry.”

“Uh, that's okay – ”

“I broke your plant in the bathroom,” Jane told him. “I didn't mean to. I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, that don't matter,” Billy said. “Don't worry about it.”

“Sorry.”

She looked all overwhelmed still and Billy felt like shit. Maybe she thought he didn't want to deal with her or some shit; that wasn't true. Well he *didn't* want to deal with this crap but it wasn't her fault or nothing. Bein' a chick seemed like it totally sucked. “Hey, man, don't worry about it, you can't help it,” he told her. “It ain't bad or nothin'. Still don't feel good?”

“I don't know.”

“That's okay. Look, I'll get ya set up, we can watch your movie or whatever.”

“Okay.”

Billy made her some popcorn while Jane unloaded all their bags and spread her candy out on the counter. Billy thought about it; he guessed she wouldn't really wanna go out or nothin' but he could try to make it less shitty for her. She was still just a kid after all. He went into his room and got all of his blankets out, then started moving the couches around.

Jane was holdin' her popcorn bowl out in the kitchen and staring at him. "What are you doing?" She looked like she thought he was gonna put her in fucking quarantine or something.

"Gotta make the movie set-up." He started makin' the kid a big fort with his blankets; he hadn't done this shit since he was like ten or something. When he'd been real little and gotten sick with a cold or the flu, his mom had always done some fun stuff like this with him. He knew that Jane wasn't really sick or whatever, but maybe it was kinda the same.

Making a good fort was pretty serious shit; Billy wasn't a kid no more but he still knew that. He unhooked Max's stupid Christmas lights from the wall and got 'em strung up across the room. The blankets drooped under the line so he reinforced them with his bookshelf and the stupid coat-rack that Henderson'd got him. It'd been sitting untouched the whole time since it was the middle of summer; Billy'd finally found a use for it.

Jane watched him get everything set up and finally started talkin' to him. Billy tried to answer all her questions; she had a lot. No, it didn't last all month, just a couple days. Yeah every girl got it; yeah it was dumb that you had to pay for shit for it. No it wasn't bad; Max could tell her more stuff. It was okay that she didn't know. No she wasn't gonna get pregnant just from holdin' Wheeler Jr's hand (Billy lamented his life again).

He got pretty into setting up the fort; once he was finished it spanned about half the living room. He got the pillows from Max's room too and put 'em in. Good shit. "Hahaha," Billy said. "Okay, what d'ya think?"

Elijane inspected it critically and then climbed in. "It's better than at Mike's house," she told him all serious. Haha! Take that, Wheeler Jr.

Billy put her movie on and opened up all their candy as the previews started playin'; he got in the fort too. Jane seemed a little better now and she didn't look like she wanted to fucking cry anymore which was good. Billy was real tired from being nice all day; he ate a buncha chocolate marshmallows and then passed out before the stupid mouse in the movie had even made it to America.

He woke up a couple hours later to the front door opening when Steve came in. Jane had left him all alone in the fort and he was flopped out on his back like a dead fish. Steve said, "Uh, Bill?" in a weird voice.

"Yeah." Billy sat up on his elbows and his head knocked into the bookshelf. Now that Harrington had busted in on him, he kinda felt like a fucking dumbass layin' in here or whatever. Jesus God there was even a stuffed animal next to him; Billy glared at it.

Steve came over and got down on his knees and stuck his head into the fort. His pretty hair looked all floppy and he had a buncha bags with him. He tossed Billy's jean jacket onto his chest; it smelled like Harrington's fancy cologne now. "What are you doing, did you make this?"

"What? No," Billy lied. "Kid musta knocked me out and drug me in here."

Steve got his Billy-is-amusing face on in two seconds and he nodded real serious; he was teasing Billy. "Okay, yeah. Sure, that makes more sense, actually."

Billy sat up a little more. He was still kinda sleepy and his blankets were real comfy. It looked cool in here with all the lights and shit. Billy knew that was lame but whatever. "Where's she at, she still here?" It would be the perfect addition to a great goddamn weekend if Jane had gone off and pulled a runner on him.

“Where else would she be? I think she's in Max's room, she's got her music on and the lights on.”

Oh. That was okay. “We was watchin' a movie together,” Billy told him.

“Yeah, I see that.” Steve looked even more amused by him; Billy didn't know why.

He rubbed his face. “Mm. What time's it?”

“Like a quarter-past eight. Sorry it's kinda late and all, I had to stop at home first. Hey, I got you presents, you wanna see 'em?”

“Sure,” Billy said. Steve just started crawlin' on into the fort like he lived there so Billy kicked out and put his foot on Harrington's shoulder to stop him. “Yo, you gotta ask to come in first, shithead.”

Steve laughed at him a little. His eyebrows went way up and he made a cute face. He put his hand around Billy's ankle. “Do I?”

“Yeah, it's the rules,” Billy told him.

“Oh, right. Right, you're right, I'm sorry. Uh, okay – permission to enter?”

Billy thought about it; Steve grinned at him. “Yeah, you can come in.”

Harrington wriggled in next to him with all his dumb presents. He sat up and looked around. “Hmm, okay.” He nodded all serious; the Christmas lights made his face look different. “Hey, this is nice in here, I like this thing ya did with the bookshelf,” he said; he was bein' real cute. “It's very, uh, innovative and all, this is really good architecture.”

Shit Billy loved him; his chest felt tight with it. “Come over here, dumbass.”

Harrington climbed on top of him and kissed him hard. Billy wound an arm around his back. “Hi, I missed you,” Steve said like a nerd.

“Me too.”

They kissed again, real slow. After a minute Steve sat up and looked at him. “Are you guys having fun or whatever? Why'd you build a fort?”

“Tried to cheer the kid up, she got her period,” Billy told him.

Harrington winced and pulled a face. “Jesus, really? That's wonderful.”

“Yeah, her first one.”

“Oh, *shit*,” Steve gasped; he sat up a little more and his eyes got big. “God, are you *serious*? Are you, are you *okay*?” Really nobody understood him better than Harrington.

“I dunno, man.” Billy told him, “Broke my plant in the bathroom.” It was Max's plant anyway but whatever. Billy'd liked watering it and moving it around. He wondered if there was like blood everywhere or something from the kid.

“That's okay, actually I got you a new one,” Harrington said all cute. “What happened, did she totally freak out?”

“Wasn't that bad.” Billy told him about how weird the kid had been actin' all weekend and how she'd said her stomach had hurt, then about how he'd thought she'd cut herself on his razor or some shit.

“Je-sus Christ, that's worse than in frickin' *Carrie* or something.”

Billy didn't know about all that. Even so: “Yeah, I almost fell off the goddamn couch.”

“God, yeah, well, I guess, uh – “ Steve laughed a little – “better you than me. What? Sorry,” he said at the face Billy made. “You couldn't call Max for her?”

“Out with her dad's new girlfriend.”

“Oh, man, that sucks. Is she okay? El, I mean. We should like take her somewhere or whatever, I don't know what you're supposed to do.”

"Me either. I been tryin' to get her out all weekend." Billy looked over at all the fancy bags. "What you get me?" he asked Steve.

Steve sat up and started rifling through his shopping bags. "Uh, I don't know. It's mostly just stupid stuff, don't get too excited or anything. I got crap for Max and Dustin too."

"You didn't have to get me shit."

"Sure I did, I thought about you like every day," Harrington said like a fucking sweetheart. He was making Billy feel all stupid inside again.

"So let's see it."

Harrington had got him a Chicago Blackhawks t-shirt (they were okay and all – not as good as the Flyers or the Rangers; definitely better than the fuckin' Oilers though) and a keychain. He showed Billy the stupid plant he'd got him; it was another ivy plant and the pot it was in was all fancy, maybe ceramic. He'd got Billy a bottle of booze from the hotel and a ritzy switchblade with a silver handle; he yelped like a puppy and jumped back when Billy popped the button on the side and the blade shot out.

"Jesus, do you have to do that right in front of my fuckin' face?"

"You said it was only a four inch blade," Billy told him; Steve made a great face. "Why'd you get me this?"

"I'm kinda surprised you don't have one already."

"Had a knife when I was like fifteen, my dad hawked it though."

"Yeah, I bet he did," Steve said. "I just thought you'd think it was cool."

Billy did think it was cool. He turned it over in his hand a couple times. "You really think I should have somethin' like this?" He wasn't really but all the kids said he was too crazy.

"Uh, I don't know," Steve said in a weird voice. "I figured you'd like it."

“Yeah, I do.” Billy put the blade away and slid it into his jeans pocket. It was real heavy, had probably been expensive as hell.

Steve was still lookin' at him in this really weird way; Billy didn't know what it was. “I, I dunno, I was just thinkin' about you. You – I don't know, I was just thinkin', you know, like if you had something like that before, maybe, uh – that wouldn't have happened last month with you guys and all.”

Stevie was too fucking cute; he really thought Billy could take like five guys with a goddamn switchblade. “Yeah, you worried about me?”

“No, I never worry about you, Bill, I want you to get frickin' hijacked again,” Harrington said all sarcastic like a grumpy bitch. “That was a lie, I'm sorry. You know you really freaked me out, I couldn't do anything. I just, uh, I don't know, I thought – ”

“I ain't worried about that no more,” Billy told him. He didn't really want to think about all that shit. Stevie was a sweetheart and all but he really didn't want to think about it.

“Sure, I know that. Uh, we don't have to talk about it again. Hey, just promise me you won't try to, like, knife me if I buy you the wrong soda or whatever, we'll be good.”

Billy licked his lips. “Well, honey, maybe don't buy me the wrong soda then,” he said real sweet.

“You're such an *asshole*,” Steve told him; he was smiling though. “Do you like your plant?” he asked like a little nerd. He was good at changing the subject.

“Yeah, I can't wait for the fucking cat to start eating it.”

“Is she in here too?”

“Hope not.”

Steve looked around again; he picked up Max's little stuffed animal and looked delighted. “Oh my god, is this your bear?” He walked it up Billy's chest. “What's his name? Or is this, ah, a girl? No, it's a guy,

I can tell. Are you *cheating* on me?"

Jesus God. Billy smacked it away. "It's Max's, you shit."

"Huh, I don't know." Steve laughed at him. He flopped over onto his side and Billy kissed him some more. Shit Billy had really missed him, even though Steve was probably the corniest person on the planet and thought he was way too funny. Billy pulled him closer and kissed him and kissed him. He felt Steve's tongue against his and his body against his; it was good.

Steve was wearing a fancy button-down shirt that Billy liked; it was pale blue and had a pattern on it. It wasn't quite a work shirt with a cute little tie but it was almost as good. They kissed some more and Steve rolled on top of him. Billy hooked his ankle around Steve's and started working at getting Harrington's shirt untucked from his pants. He felt like a hundred times better just looking at Harrington so havin' Steve on top of him made him feel about a thousand times better. He wondered if they was gonna get down to it right in the stupid fort.

"Oh, wow, Bill, do you have, like, a knife in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?" Steve pulled back and asked him. He had the dumbest grin on his face; Billy rolled his eyes looking at him.

It was both actually but Harrington was still too fucking lame. "Man, shut the *fuck* up," Billy begged him. "Jesus." Steve laughed again.

The floorboard out in the little hallway creaked and Billy felt caught. Fucking Christ he'd forgotten all about the kid about three goddamn minutes. "Hey Jane," he said loudly.

"I didn't want to wake you up."

"Whoops," Harrington whispered like a little nerd. He sat up and accidentally crushed Billy's hand with his elbow. "Oh, sorry! Okay, PG-13, we don't have to do this stuff right now." He climbed on out of the fort while Billy adjusted his jeans. "Hey, El."

Steve talked to the kid and got her cheered up in two seconds; everybody liked presents Billy guessed. Steve had gotten her a shirt

too, a weird little clip for her hair, and some glass statue from the hotel. He said he had a big teddy bear for her out in his car too. "You feelin' okay and everything now?" he asked her.

"I think so. Billy helped me."

He hadn't really. "Took her to the store."

"We got a movie," Eliane told Steve.

Billy climbed out of the fort too and went and sat down next to the kid on the couch. "She paid the lady and all."

"Hey, that's great," Harrington said all encouragingly. He was sitting on the floor to talk to Jane like they was in a preschool or some shit. "You know what, we should go out and all, it's not that late. Do you wanna do something?"

She was hesitating again. "I'm not sure."

"We could go to, you know they play these dumb shows out at Wrigley Park, we could go there and – oh, you know what, that's probably too loud for you, that's okay." Steve talked and talked; he was good at that. "Oh, okay, I know, we should go out to Morrisville, do you wanna get ice cream?" he asked the kid. He told her, the clincher, "You can get it on a *waffle*."

Jane wavered and then gave in. She couldn't really say no to that Billy guessed. "Okay." She said she wanted to take a shower first and Steve said okay, the place was open until like midnight.

She went off to use the bathroom and Steve got up and started pokin' around the kitchen. He'd discovered all of the kid's candy and was eating like a million things even though they was about to get ice cream.

Billy laid on the couch and watched him; he wanted Harrington to come back over here. They had like twenty minutes maybe. That was a good amount of time. "So what'd you do all week?" Steve asked him.

"Went to class. Went to work."

“Sorry about Dustin, I didn't really think he'd come over here.” Steve had reached the kitchen table; he started going through all of Billy's papers. “What'd you do today? I was gonna call you before I left. I didn't know if – “ he stopped suddenly; Billy guessed he'd found his college papers. “You *asshole*, I knew you took this shit back from me.”

Steve looked at the front of the application for a while, then flipped it over to the next page. “Oh, damn, you actually filled all this crap out,” he mumbled.

Billy felt dumb as shit. He hadn't exactly thought out the part where he gave Steve his stuff back; he didn't know what all to say or to tell him. “Said I was gonna do it if you took too long.”

“Yeah, you didn't really have to – ” Steve flipped another page; he didn't say anything again for a couple minutes. “Shit, you really wrote my paper for me?” Billy didn't answer him again.

Steve took the papers from the table and then hopped up to sit on the counter; he kicked his legs against the dishwasher and sat there lookin' at the papers. He ate some more candy, staring down at them. When he finally looked up, he had a super weird expression on his face. “When – uh, when did you do this?” he asked in a funny voice.

“Like Thursday.”

“Right, okay,” Steve furrowed his brow and kept reading; he had major frown-wrinkle going on.

“What, you pissed off?”

“No, I'm reading it,” Steve told him patiently; Billy didn't really know what to say. Steve was quiet for a long time and Billy wondered if he was getting ticked off or something. He *did* remember that Steve was just kinda slow at reading or whatever though.

Steve flipped the paper over and frowned at it; he looked cute as hell sitting up on the counter. “Shit, this – this is really good,” he said without looking up. “How did you do this?”

“You don't gotta use it or whatever.”

“Uh, I don't – “ Steve kind of laughed. He looked at the papers some more. “How, how did you do this, you really wrote this in like two days?”

Billy didn't really see the big deal. That kinda crap was easy for him. “I guess. Not like it's *Ulysses* or some shit.”

“Yeah, I don't know who that is,” Steve said; Billy smiled at him.

Harrington kept on readin' his papers; he still had the frown-wrinkle between his eyes but Billy guessed he didn't look really mad or whatever. “Jesus, how the hell did you do this? This, this even sounds like me, well if I could actually write or whatever. How the – how'd you know my grandfather's name and everything?”

Billy felt stupid as shit again. “You showed me that thing you wrote last fall.”

“Uh, right.” Steve stared at Billy like he'd just started talkin' another language or something.

“What?”

Harrington looked at him some more. “Nothing. I, I didn't think you'd actually remember that shit.”

“I 'member lots of stuff you tell me,” Billy said like a big gay loser; he felt real dumb afterwards.

Steve glanced back down at his paper. “You really didn't have to do this for me.”

“I was bored,” Billy told him. He said again, “You don't gotta use it or whatever.”

“No, I mean, it's good, it's really good. It's, it's great.”

“Copy it over if you want and make it sound more like you, add a couple spelling mistakes or whatever.”

“Fuck you,” Steve said; he was smiling though. He slid off the counter and walked slowly over to the couch, then sat down beside Billy. His

pretty hair was fallin' into his face. He looked back down at the papers again and shuffled 'em up. "Yeah, Bill, the thing is – uh, you know I can't really write like this, if I actually get in I can't write like this. I won't be able to pass the fuckin' classes. I'm, I'm not smart like that."

Jesus God he was starting up again. Harrington hadn't even ever had to take summer school or some shit; Billy didn't know why he acted this way. "Man, you can pass the fucking classes, you ain't gotta be a goddamn English major."

"I guess so." He still looked unconvinced.

"I'll help you with your shit, Max too. We'll write your papers for ya."

Steve laughed. "Uh, yeah, you don't actually have to – what, you would really do that?"

"I guess," Billy said. "I mean if you still got time for me or whatever after you go."

"Why wouldn't I?" Harrington scrunched his face up and looked over at him. "What, you think I'd ditch you or something?"

Billy felt like a goddamn idiot – he hated feelin' this way. He wasn't like this real insecure pathetic slob who thought that Steve could find someone better than him, well not anymore. It wasn't that. He didn't really think that somebody could care about Harrington more than he did. It was just that maybe Steve didn't know what he wanted. He might go off to school and decide he wanted something totally different than Billy. Not better but different. Maybe it was the same thing; Billy didn't know. Was what happened in like every high school romance movie. "I dunno. Maybe."

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen," Steve told him as if he was readin' Billy's thoughts. Obviously he couldn't really. "If I – I mean, whatever, if I even get into State, I'd only be like forty minutes away, we can still hang out all the time. You can come see me, I could go to your place every weekend."

"If that's what you want."

"That is what I want, you dummy." Steve leaned over and kissed him; he slid a hand up the side of Billy's neck and tangled it in his hair. "You really didn't have to do this for me," he said. "I really – you're the best, thank you so much." He kissed Billy some more.

Billy *was* the best; he didn't understand why more people didn't know this already. "You still gotta send it out," he mumbled against Steve's mouth.

"Uh-huh."

"Get your transcripts and shit."

"Sure, I will." Steve climbed on top of him and put his hands under Billy's t-shirt. Shit. Okay. Billy was really glad he'd shaved and stuff earlier. "Damn, I really missed you," Steve mumbled like a horny nerd.

"Me too." Billy was getting really hot anyway; he'd been wanting to choke himself on Steve's huge pretty cock for about three days now. Unfortunately he could still hear the shower running and hear Elijane bumbling around in there which was kind of a turn-off. "Better get offa me, man."

"Uh, get *off* of you, or *get* you off – " Harrington was too funny.

"Gonna make the kid go blind, she comes back out here," Billy told him. "You 'member Maxine the other week?"

Harrington turned kind of red; he'd gotten so embarrassed. Billy thought it'd been pretty fun actually – he hadn't been the one gettin' bit on and moanin' real loud though. "Okay, yeah, you're right, I'll stop." He climbed off of Billy and collapsed back down next to him. He adjusted his huge amazing dick in his pants; Billy stared at him. "Oh, my god, do you have to fucking look at me?" He jammed a pillow from the couch over his lap like a baby.

"I like looking at you," Billy told him; Steve rolled his eyes.

"Whatever."

Elijane came back out a minute later anyway just like Billy'd figured.

He had real good timing for once. She was wearing baggy shorts now and one of Max's ringer t-shirts. She stood there lookin' at them for a second; Steve was rubbing his jaw and acting like he was real into the comedy movie on TV. He glanced up. "Oh, hey, you finished?"

"You don't have to act like that," El said all serious. "I know what you guys do when we're not here."

Harrington looked like he was going to have a conniption fit. "Oh yeah? Do you?"

"Kissing stuff," Jane said real serious.

Steve rubbed his mouth so Jane wouldn't see him smiling. "Ah, right. She's onto us, Bill," he said.

"We gettin' ice cream or what?" Billy asked him.

"Oh, yeah, we can go." Harrington took the pillow off his lap. Billy guessed he was back in PG-13 mode; he looked like a happy little nerd in about a minute. "We can go to – It's kinda like at this big farm, my mom used to take me when I was a kid," he told Eliane. "It's kind of out in the middle of nowhere. Ohhh, if the horses are still outside, you can pet 'em and stuff."

"Oh my god, you fuckin' hick," Billy said happily; Steve slugged him the arm, not gently.

"I'm just fricking saying! She's thirteen, she's gonna want to – "

"Okay, okay, okay." Billy blocked his arm so Harrington would stop beating on him.

They left the apartment and walked down the street to the car. Harrington's dad had a fancy Lexus like Steve's mom but a different model. Billy thought that was kinda funny.

"It's not funny, it's annoying." Steve talked his goddamn head off as he unlocked the doors. "You shoulda seen my fu – my frickin' dad this weekend, well I guess you'll see him tomorrow, are you gonna go to the party?" he asked El. "You don't have to go swimming if you don't want, and Dustin will be there for you."

Elijane made a little face. "That ain't gonna make her wanna go," Billy told him; Steve laughed.

"You can hang out with my mom, you can watch her make fun of me all day."

"Your mom seems nice." Elijane got into the backseat.

"Yeah, she's okay. Did she talk to you yesterday?"

"Yes. She's pretty."

Steve made a face. "Uh, I guess so," he said in thinly veiled disgust. He turned the key in the ignition and turned the radio up. He got an annoying dopey expression on his face. "Hey, El, you wanna hear a tape that Bills made me?"

Billy rubbed his jaw. "Man, you gonna talk about that shit every time we get in your car now?"

"This isn't my car, it's my dad's," Steve told him. "And probably, I told you nobody made me a tape before."

Jesus God. Jane said she wanted to hear the tape though. She leaned up between the front seats as Steve started takin' them down the street. "Can I have the Mickey Mouse pancakes again in the morning?" she asked Billy.

Harrington looked overjoyed. "Uh, excuse me, the *what?*"

The ice cream shop out in Morrisville was about an hour away and it really was on a farm in the middle of nowhere; was like some *Children of the Corn* shit but substantially less creepy. The main building was converted from an old red barn and in the field behind it they had some film reels playin' on a big screen like at the drive-in.

Billy and Harrington made Jane give the lady an extra three bucks and they walked on back to check it out. There were more people around than Billy'd expected; he guessed this was what passed for the night life out in Morrisville. It was so sad. *The Sound of Music* was the only thing playing; somewhere back in Hawkins Billy could envision Henderson making a comment. Jane really wanted to see it though so they ended up staying.

It was past midnight when they got back to Billy's place and Elijane was about passed out in the car. Billy carried her up into the apartment and dumped her in Max's bed, then he finally got to have Steve's amazing dick in his mouth. He pushed Harrington up onto the counter where he wanted him and started taking off his stupid belt.

Steve was arching up into his touch even though he was still acting like a sarcastic bitch. "You know you could kiss me a little first, you don't have to act like a fucking animal."

Billy kissed him and then licked his neck like a dog; he had his hand around Steve's cock already. "Better?"

"Uhh, oh god," Steve said like a moron. "Do you, what, you really think we should do this out here? The kid is like fifteen feet away," he said like a den dad or an actual dad.

"Be fine if you don't make a bunch of noise."

"I don't even do that anymore, I am so bored with you," Steve told him. They kissed some more and then Billy sucked him off. It was kinda fun to see what kinda noises he could get Harrington to make. Steve bashed his head on the cabinets twice and somehow turned the dishwasher on with his ass; he and Billy cracked up and had to run to his bedroom.

They didn't really get up to anything too crazy after they got into Billy's room; after all the kid was staying here and Billy didn't want to traumatize her. He guessed maybe he was still kinda nervous about doin' more stuff too. Steve seemed okay with it anyway. He had three twenty-minute stories to tell Billy about his coworkers and all the shit he'd done while he'd been in the city. Steve talked for forever and eventually they fell asleep.

Billy had missed Harrington being in his bed. Sunday morning was the only morning that neither of them had anything to get up early for; Billy put his arms around Steve and laid there for a long time. Across the room not-Chewy padded across the radiator and stared at them with her one creepy eye. Steve tucked his chin against Billy's shoulder and rubbed his back and messed up his hair. He didn't even talk too much since it was so early.

They kissed a couple times but they didn't really make out or hook up again or anything. Billy was pretty sure that was the first morning they'd done that, just laid there or whatever. That was mostly because of him; he was pretty sure it was annoying. Seemed like usually he couldn't stay still but sometimes he could stay still. He'd missed Steve so he could just lay there for once. They stayed in the bed until late and then Harrington reluctantly sat up and said he had to go help his mom.

When they went into the kitchen to look for food, Jane had set the table again, this time with three places. Harrington looked all touched and shit even though it was just a stupid fork and a plate on Billy's ratty-ass table. "Guess I have to stay for breakfast," he said. He tortured Billy and made a bunch of stupid comments until Billy made pancakes again, then he spent about ten minutes getting dressed and looking for his lost belt in the living room and the bedroom.

"It's on the floor by the dishwasher," Jane said finally without looking up. She was consumed with doin' the crossword in the newspaper; Billy'd hawked it offa the guy downstairs in A-5 who looked like Kevin Costner (he had two dogs).

Steve turned bright red which was amazing to see. "That's, that's so weird, I guess Chewy must have dragged it over there, she's totally nuts," he said like a dope; Billy grinned at him.

Steve finally left for home at past noon and told them to come over whenever. He said that most of his family was coming over around one for the party but that Billy didn't need to be there until later. "Or at all. Or actually I could just stay here too."

"Man, just fucking go, you'll be fine."

“What, I know. I don't care, I would just rather be here.” Harrington killed even more time helping Billy wash dishes like they were a married couple and then Billy kicked him out for home.

He laid about in the fort with Jane watchin' cartoons until past three. He wasn't even sure if she wanted to go and he hadn't really planned on asking her. He knew she liked Harrington and all but she might not want to be around a buncha new people. Finally she sat up and turned the TV off though and said she was ready to go.

“Yeah? Okay, gimme a sec.” Billy went into his room and put his bathing suit on. It wasn't really a Speedo even if Maxine teased the hell out of him and said it was a speedo. He put his Garbage Pail Kid jeans on over it and one of his Def Leppard shirts. He figured he didn't need to try and look too good – he only wanted to look good for Harrington, anyway, and he figured Steve would be freaking out or drinking the whole time.

“Ready to go?”

“Yep,” Jane said like Billy. She had his aviator sunglasses on and she looked real cool in her ripped-up shorts and one of Max's old tank tops. Billy was pretty sure it was actually Jane's tank top now; girls were always tradin' clothes or whatever. “Are we supposed to bring something?”

“Hope not,” Billy said. Jane said that she had told Hop about the pool party at Steve's earlier but Billy wrote a note for him and left it on the door anyway. They drove Steve's car back to his house and Billy parked it on the street since the driveway was totally full-up.

Harrington and his mom met them at the side of the house; Steve's mom was holding a big drink. Harrington had one of his old pals from school with him or something, this skinny kid with a long ponytail and the worst hockey jersey on. They were both carryin' a bunch of pool chairs and Steve's face was real red like he was either sunburnt or drunk already.

“Hey, you made it.” He dropped the pool chairs and grabbed Billy's shoulder; they were pretty close together for a moment and Billy was almost afraid Harrington was gonna plant one on him right there or

something.

“Parked your car on the street,” Billy told him.

“Yeah, that's fine.” Steve stared at him like a nut some more and then dropped his arm. “Hey, did you meet my friend Alex yet?”

“Yeah, hey.”

“Alex, this is Bill, Bill, that's Alex, now you guys know each other. Oh, that's El, she's friends with Bill's sister, well she's our friend too, we like her. El, you look great.”

“Thank you,” Elijane said.

Steve seemed to be talkin' even more than usual, or in a weird way or something. “Man, are you drunk already?” Billy asked him.

Harrington made a face. He had really ugly swim trunks on. “No, I'm not drunk!”

“Yes he is,” said his mom.

“He's pretty drunk,” Alex said.

“Oh, my god, no I'm not, I've been moving shit around all afternoon.”

“Don't say shit, Steven.”

“I was moving stuff too,” Alex put in.

Steve looked really grumpy. “Are you gonna say hey to me, El?”

She was smiling. “Hi.”

Steve's mom smiled at Elijane for a moment too and then went back to her favorite pastime, which was torturing Steve. “You should have brought Billy around last night, he could have been in the family photo,” she said in her dry voice.

Harrington's face went from red to a weird purple color; it was so interesting. “Oh my god, can you not do this right now?”

"I didn't know you guys were doin' some family thing yesterday," Billy said; Harrington hadn't had to stay over with him.

"I didn't want Steven to be in the family photo this year anyhow, he always makes a face," Mrs. Harrington told him.

"What are you talking about? No I don't." Steve squinted exaggeratedly at his mom and she laughed. "We made a deal, that's why I'm doing all this shit now."

"Steven."

"Why I'm doing all this *stuff* now," Steve corrected.

"Why are you being so rude to your friends? Can't you go and get them set up?" Steve's mom asked him. "Stop making Alex do everything, he's a guest."

"Oh, my god," Steve said again. He picked his chairs up and led them all around to the back of the house; Billy met four really old aunts and a drunk uncle. Steve got a kiss from each aunt which probably explained why he'd been drinking already. It was too good.

There were maybe about thirty people in the backyard, actually less of a crowd than Billy'd expected, but it was still a lot. Two different radios were on playin' two different horrible pop stations and there were colored string lights strung up everywhere.

Jane was stickin' real close by him; she bumped into Billy's back when he stopped walking. Luke and Leia bayed sadly from down in the basement. You could still hear 'em over the music.

"Linda's here somewhere, she'll give you some booze," Steve told him. "Do you want to eat again?" he asked El.

"Thanks, I'm okay," Alex said; Billy was lamenting his life. This kid seemed even cornier than Harrington, and he definitely didn't have the eyes or the ass to make up for it.

"Not you, asshole." Steve turned back to the kid. "We have cake and stuff, my mom's sister is gonna barbecue later."

“Okay,” Elijane said. Steve set up the chairs and got her a plate of food. There were a bunch of little kids in the pool splashing Henderson; Harrington started pointing them all out and listing names like Billy was gonna remember any of 'em.

“That's my cousin Maisy, she's four, I just met her today for the first time.”

“She did a wicked cannonball earlier,” Alex told them. “That kid Dustin was teaching her.”

“Yeah? Surprised there's still water left in the pool,” Billy said; Alex laughed. Billy was still deciding whether or not he was all right.

“STEVE!” yelled three or four old ladies from over on the patio.

Steve kinda looked like he was bein' tortured even though it was just his family. “Oh god, I haven't talked to them all yet. Sorry, I swear I can actually hang out with you guys later, I did promise my mom I'd help her out. I – YO, WHAT THE FUCK!” he yelled when Henderson popped up close by and splashed them.

Henderson leaned out of the pool and stretched out with his elbows on the concrete. “Hey El, hey Billy. Where's your swimsuit?” he asked Elijane. She gave him a dark look and didn't answer him.

“Dustin, don't bother her right now, I mean it,” Harrington told him like a den dad. “Alex, Bill likes the Flyers too, you guys can talk while I'm gone.”

Billy stared in betrayal. Steve was smiling at him real cute; Billy felt annoyed.

“STEVEN!” said the aunts again.

“Shit, okay, I gotta go. You okay?” he asked El.

She had sat down by the pool near Henderson and was eating her cake already. “Yes.”

“Steve, where is my mimosa?” Henderson asked him like a shitberg. Harrington ignored him; he clapped Billy on the back again and

wandered off to get kissed by more old ladies.

Billy sat down by the kid and let himself get roped into a conversation with Harrington's chatty little friend; he had nothin' else to do. Alex spent forty minutes tellin' Billy his whole life story and then he spent a while grillin' Billy about what it'd been like to live in California. After a while Billy decided that the guy wasn't a threat to his relationship with Harrington and he let himself relax. Now they could talk about the real shit: sports.

Alex said he'd been on the baseball team with Harrington before; he said he was too short for basketball (since this was a friend of Steve's, Billy restrained himself with all his power and didn't make a comment). He wished Hawkins had an actual hockey team: "Street hockey's okay, blades are so much better, though." Billy agreed. "Okay, so since you're from Cali, big question, you support the Mighty Ducks or the Sharks?"

First off nobody actually said *Mighty Ducks* like a fuckin' nerd. Second: "They both kinda suck."

Alex grinned at him. "Okay, I didn't wanna say anything."

"I ain't offended, I don't play for 'em."

Alex blathered on and on; Billy could see why he and Harrington were buddies. After about another hour of it though he was startin' to get pretty tired. Alex got up and wandered off to find a drink so Billy took his shirt and his jeans off and jumped into the pool.

"AUGH, THAT WAS MY HEAD!" Henderson said in two seconds. "Do you like Alex? Don't worry, Steve is not into him in that way."

Jesus God. "Quit talkin' to me." Billy swam away from him.

Henderson floated after him like a pufferfish. "Hey, what's wrong with El, she told me not to speak to her for four to six days!" HAHA!

Billy dog-paddled over to the kid; she was sitting by the shallow end of the pool with her feet in the water, watchin' the little kids bounce around and pretend to drown each other. "Doin' okay?"

“Dustin splashed me twice so I made water go up his nose,” Elijane told him.

“Good for you.” She looked all proud and shit. “You need somethin’? We don’t have to stay too long.” He looked at her pink wristwatch; it was past six already.

“I think I’m okay. I want Jim to come here. Steve told me I could go in the basement and see the dogs.” Billy kinda felt like doing that too. “He was looking for you. He went in the house.”

“All right.” Billy pushed himself out of the pool and went off to find his man. “Just make somethin’ explode if ya need me.”

“Okay.”

He got intercepted by one of Steve’s old-lady relatives askin’ if he was the entertainment and then Steve’s old lady from work caught him too as he went up to the house. Harrington talked about her a lot so Billy figured she was all right. Linda, he was pretty sure that was her name. She was standin’ around with a tall redheaded chick and Billy guessed she was the infamous *Joanne*.

They both talked to Billy for a couple minutes – Linda asked Billy a little bit about his family; Joanne seemed disappointed that Harrington’s girlfriend hadn’t shown up – and finally sent him on his way. It seemed like everybody had a lot to say about Steve. Billy was learning so much.

The cold air of the house hit him like a shock; it was hotter than hell outside today. Out in the front hall it was real quiet but he could hear Harrington talking to someone in the kitchen. He sounded real annoyed so Billy went on down the hallway.

Steve looked up all surprised when Billy walked in; he was sittin’ on the counter with the phone pressed against his ear. “Hey, what are you doing?” His lip curled. “No, I’m not talking to you!” he said into the phone. His face was still kinda red like from earlier. “Okay, okay, sorry, I wasn’t. No, I’m not. Yeah, but I just don’t know why you said you would be here if you – ”

He cut himself off; Billy guessed whoever was on the other end of the line had started talkin'.

Steve rolled his eyes and looked massively annoyed. *Sorry*, he mouthed to Billy; he mostly looked just irritated though. Billy leaned against the wall and looked at him.

Steve started chewing on his nails like a gross person. “No, I don't. I didn't say that. Yeah, because Mom thought you were going to be here, she's doing all this shit by herself.” He laughed shortly and switched the phone to his other ear. “What do you mean that's *her* family? Weird, I thought it was – okay, yeah, uh, we both know you're not at work, though.”

He was quiet again and then his face changed suddenly; Billy watched his shoulders hunch. “No, I don't,” he said in a subdued voice. “Okay. Okay. No. No I wasn't. I – what?” His face got even weirder. “No, *sir*, I wasn't,” he said like he was bein' tortured. “I know. I know that. Okay. No, it doesn't even matter anymore.” Another longer pause; Harrington chewed on his nails some more. “Whatever. Whatever. Sure, I don't care. Bye.” He hung up the phone and stared all moody.

Billy guessed that he'd picked a great time to walk in on him. “You okay?”

Steve looked up like he was surprised or something, or like he'd forgotten Billy was there. His eyebrows went down; he didn't exactly look happy. “What are you doing in here?”

“Thought you was looking for me.”

“Yeah, I just wanted to see if you were okay. You didn't have to come looking for me,” Steve said all agitated. Billy wondered what all had happened to him in the last hour or so to put him in one of his bitchy primadonna moods.

Well, he guessed he could use his context clues. “That your dad on the phone?”

“Yeah, of course it was my dad, I'm so glad you heard all of that, by

the way.”

“I didn't hear nothin',” Billy told him.

Steve didn't answer him for a second; he braced his arms against the counter and stood back up again. “He's being a total fucking dickhead, my mom planned this thing for like six months, now he's not gonna show up.”

“Hey, maybe it's better if he's not here, man.” Harrington always seemed to get into a real crazy mood whenever somebody mentioned his old man, so it'd probably be even worse if the prick was actually around.

Harrington's eyebrows went up and Billy guessed that had been the wrong thing to say. “Uh, yeah, that's really not better, he just – my mom was looking for him, he's fuckin' embarrassing her. She's really upset, all my stupid family members are waitin' for him to show up.”

“She looked okay to me.” He'd just passed her out on the deck; she'd been laughing with somebody and she'd had another big drink in her hand.

“Okay, you don't actually know my mom, you've only had a conversation with her like five times,” Steve told him; he sounded pretty mad and Billy felt surprised. “You definitely don't know my dad either.”

“I didn't say I knew your dad.”

“Okay, whatever,” Steve said all moody.

“There a reason you're pissed off at me right now?” Billy asked him.

“I'm – not pissed off, I'm just, just saying you don't know everything.”

“Yeah, cause you never tell me shit.”

Steve laughed at him, and not in the good way like when he thought Billy was bein' cute. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

“Uh, do you hear yourself talking right now?” Steve asked him. “Right, *I* never tell *you* – okay, you know what, I, I don't really have time to fight with you right now, sorry. I don't wanna – “

“I wasn't fighting with you.”

“Okay. Okay, sorry. You're dripping on my floor,” Steve told him; Billy looked down at himself like a dodo. “Sorry, this is just like too many – I gotta go find my aunt's stupid fucking cat, it's probably puking on my goddamn bed again. I'll talk to you later or whatever.” Harrington stalked out of the kitchen all ticked off in his stupid swim trunks.

Billy watched him go. He kinda felt like a dunce or a jackass again – he actually hadn't been tryin' to get into a fight with Steve for once. He wasn't really sure what he'd done wrong; he'd barely said like four things.

After a while he got himself together and went back outside; he didn't see Jane out by the pool anymore. He put his jeans on again over his swimsuit and patted his pockets for his lighter and his smokes. The sun was all bright and cheery and it made him feel even worse. He lit up a cigarette and then wandered out to the front of the house so's he wouldn't kill any elderly aunts with the smoke.

Billy sat on the front steps and smoked. He still felt kind of shitty, he guessed, but not all crazy or anything, like how he'd felt last weekend when he and Harrington hadn't been talkin'. Steve was obviously ticked off at his old man; he could be mad at Billy if he wanted to be. It was a lot of people around and Billy knew Harrington got all stressed out about that stupid shit.

He sat out there for a while, about a half hour, smoking his cigs. It *was* a lot of people and he kinda didn't wanna chance goin' round back and running into Harrington's chatty friend again. He should probably get up and look for the kid; he didn't actually want her to explode something.

Behind him, the front door opened and a shadow fell ominously upon him; it was Steve's mom. “There you are!” she said.

Billy turned and looked up at her. She looked real pretty like she always did and she had a fancy dress on over her fancy bikini; even so it was kinda way too much of Steve's mom for Billy to deal with.

She still didn't look really fuckin' upset or embarrassed like Harrington had said. "We were looking for you out back," she told him; Billy didn't know if he wanted to ask who the 'we' was. "Do you think you could come inside and help me for a few minutes? I have to serve some more drinks."

"Uh, sure." Billy got up and followed her inside. He guessed it was time for Conversation Number Six with Mrs. Harrington.

He didn't really know why she wanted his help with anything; maybe she was gonna read him the riot act for screwin' around with her only son. He followed her into the kitchen and watched as she opened up the fridge.

Steve's mom talked a lot while she got all her booze set up. She had a big bowl of sangria or some shit chilling on the counter now; it hadn't been there an hour ago when Steve had been in here bein' mean to him.

Billy handed her a bunch of glasses that had been set out too and she started mixing drinks. She gave them back to Billy so's he'd put them down on this fancy platter (Billy bet it was like real silver too). "I found your sister's friend by herself out on the deck, I sent her off with Alex and Dustin," Mrs. Harrington told him.

"Yeah, she don't talk too much."

One of her pretty eyebrows went up. "Seems to be a common trait." Billy guessed that was a dig at him or something. "What is her name, exactly, is it El or Jane? Eleanor? Ellen?"

He didn't really know what all to say to her. "Likes to be called El."

"That's interesting. She told me that the police chief is coming here to get her later, I'm hoping my house is up to code."

"Yeah, I think you'll be okay."

Steve's mom handed him some more drinks to set out. She spent a few seconds just looking at him; Billy really wished he'd thought to put his shirt back on earlier too.

"Thank you for coming in here with me, I've been back and forth doing this all day," she told him.

"Figured you would hire somebody to do all this kinda sh – stuff for you."

Mrs. Harrington smiled like Billy was being funny; her mouth curled up in the same way that Steve's did. "Would you like me to pay you?"

Jesus God. "Uh, that's not what I meant."

"When Steven was about eight and I went back to work, we had a maid for a few years," Mrs. Harrington told him. Of course they had. "Lovely woman, Mrs. Ramos. Steven adored her, of course. She babysat him until he declared he was too old. Usually, even now, when I have a party like this, she'll come out here and help me. She is in Puerto Rico this summer, she just sent me a card."

Billy didn't know what to say to that either. "Uh, that's nice of her."

Steve's mom looked out the window. The counter they were at was by the side of the house and there weren't too many people in the yard over this way. There were a few horseshoe spikes set up out by the woods and Harrington was standin' around with Dustin and Elijane and his little chatty friend and a couple of the smaller kids. He didn't look that ticked off anymore and they seemed to be showin' the kids how to play. Steve kept missing the spikes on purpose (maybe, Billy thought) and El was laughing at him.

Mrs. Harrington watched Steve being an idiot with the kids. She handed Billy two more drinks; Billy was pretty damn sure she could be doin' this shit by herself. "How has my son seemed lately to you?" she asked him.

Billy looked at her in a great fear. She was proly about to start threatenin' him in a minute, he figured. "Guess he's okay."

"Is he?" Mrs. Harrington said. She gazed out the window some more.

"You know Steven doesn't tell me much anymore. We fought so much the previous year."

"Yeah, he thinks you're still mad at him."

She looked over sharply and Billy thought maybe he shouldn't have said that. "I was never mad at him."

"I don't really know too much about it."

She kept on ladling out her booze. She handed him another glass. "I imagine he's told you about all the issues that his father and I have."

"Said he was supposed to be here today."

"Yes, well." She smiled; it wasn't exactly a nice smile. "My husband's job is funny like that. He can't always be where he's supposed to be at, if you can believe it." Billy didn't know what to say again so he kept his mouth shut. Steve's mom kept on talking. "When we first started having ... trouble, I would say that I did not exactly handle myself well. Steven wanted me to divorce his father, and I remember that I laughed at him. It seemed so simple to him. I was quite cruel to him, he was only about twelve. I don't think he's ever really forgotten that. I imagine that he's still mad at me, too."

That was a lot of shit and Billy wasn't sure why she was tellin' him all this stuff. He wasn't really sure how to answer her. "He's not mad at you, talks about ya all the time."

Steve's mom smiled at him, then she stopped smiling. She looked out the window again. "Steven is so sensitive. He always has been. He takes everything to heart, he feels things very deeply. Do you find that to be a good quality in a person?"

Billy stared at her; he wondered if she was about to bash a drink over his head or some shit. If she killed him, she could probably pay someone to hide the body. She just gave him another glass though. "Uh. Sure, it can be."

"It's one of my favorite things about him. I'm embarrassing him right now telling you this," Steve's mom told him. She smiled again. "Steve always tries to please everyone. Some people might try to take

advantage of that.”

Billy wondered if she thought he was takin' advantage of Steve or something; he felt scared again. “I guess so.”

“He had a bad time of it last year, you know, after he split up with Miss Wheeler.” Billy got a kick out of Steve's mom callin' Nancy *Miss Wheeler* even though he was still terrified. “He was so angry all of the time. He complained about you very much, also.”

“Yeah, he likes to do that.” He hadn't thought he'd done too much to Steve last year for him to complain about. Unless she meant even before that, he guessed.

“I imagine that he wanted to be friends with you quite badly. I'm glad that he seems to have gotten what he's wanted.”

She seemed to want him to say something; she was looking over at him again. “Yeah, I think he's great,” Billy said like a moron.

Steve's mom smiled at him. “That's very nice. I'm glad that you think that.”

“He's like the best guy I know. I like hangin' out with him.” *PLATONICALLY*, Billy almost screamed in her face. He managed to stop himself, though. He definitely didn't want Harrington's mom to find out about them, but he didn't exactly want to lie to her or nothin'. It sucked.

“I'm sure he likes hanging out with you too.” She sounded like she was teasing him again; Billy didn't know what to say.

Mrs. Harrington finished pouring her drinks finally and handed him the tray. “Could you take these outside for me?”

“Sure.”

“You can just put them on the white table. Thank you, Billy.”

“Uh, no problem.”

“And thank you for talking with me.” She put her hand on his

shoulder for a second and just looked at him again; that made Billy feel weird as shit so he went on outside with his drinks. Felt like the fucking maid or some shit.

Elijane was out on the back deck with Hopper where all the tables had been set up; the chief was wearing a bright red Hawaiian and Billy almost went blind. Elijane was yapping to him all animatedly and Billy watched Hopper's face cycle through about twelve different expressions.

“Oh, *SHIT*,” Hop said loudly, sitting forward in his lawn chair; four or five elderly aunts looked over. Billy guessed Jane was telling him about her womanly troubles. He looked up and saw Billy so Billy walked on over.

“Hey kid,” Hop said. He was all crashed out in his lawn chair and was making a great face. “You guys have fun?”

“Yeah, it was great.”

“Billy bought me pads,” Elijane said; Hopper looked like he wanted to pass out. He rubbed his face slowly, for a long time.

“Did ya? Sorry about that,” he told Billy.

“Yeah, you need to start actually tellin' her about shit,” Billy said before he could stop himself. Hopper stared at him and he realized that telling the police chief of the whole goddamn town what to do might not exactly be a smart thing. He put his hands in his jeans pockets and added, “Sir.”

“I don't know if you've noticed, I don't really know what the fuck I'm doing,” Hop told him. He looked over at Jane. “Hey, I am *really* sorry, are you all right?”

“No. I won't be okay until Wednesday,” Jane told him, dead serious.

“Okay.” Hopper rubbed at his face; Billy was nearly blinded by the awful shirt again. “I'm sorry, kid, I'll make it up to you. You wanna stay some more, or you wanna go home?”

“I don't know.” She looked over at Billy like she wasn't sure he could

be left alone.

She was too fuckin' cute. "Don't worry about me, I'll be okay," Billy told her. "Come over and see me when Max gets back."

"Okay."

Billy and Elijane watched as Hop struggled to his feet; it took him a couple seconds. Maybe the chief should join him and Henderson for some cardio. Haha.

"Thanks for watching her again," Hopper told him. "I mean it." He gave Billy even more money; Billy felt weird but he wasn't *not* gonna take the money. They probably looked like they was doin' a drug deal or some shit. He could imagine the press headlines tomorrow; Mrs. Harrington would go goddamn ballistic.

She actually came out a second later anyway; Moms had like some kinda radar. She spent a while talkin' to Hopper while Elijane showed Billy where the good cake was.

Finally Mrs. Harrington finished talkin' the chief up; Billy walked the kid out to the front yard and watched as she and Hop took off in his Jeep.

It was almost dusk; the sky was red and purple. It was a little cooler out now, almost bearable. A lot of people were heading out and it seemed like most of the old folks had gone on inside or wherever the hell they went. Henderson was floating around picking stuff up out of the pool so Billy got in and helped him. They collected about twenty cups; was worse than a high school party. It definitely hadn't been *better*.

After they cleaned up the pool Dustin abandoned him to go chat up Steve's mom on the deck. He trailed after her inside the house yapping his head off. Billy was left alone; he sat at the edge of the pool and watched the one drunk uncle snoring away in a lawn chair.

Another shadow fell over him; it was just Steve though. He was wearing a different t-shirt now and had a pair of his dorky khaki shorts on.

He sat down next to Billy and put his gangly legs in the pool. He was making his super-squinty face which meant he was real sorry. "Hey, what are you still doing here?"

"Where else would I be?" Billy asked him; Steve didn't answer. "Cleaned your pool up."

"Yeah, I saw." Steve made the squinty face some more. "Where's Eleven, she okay?"

"Left with the chief about an hour ago."

"Oh. Okay." They just sat there.

"Seen your girl Joanne," Billy told him.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, she was here. Did you talk to my Aunt Mary? She kept askin' me about you."

"I don't think I seen her."

"Okay, uh, yeah, don't go inside then." Steve fidgeted and squinted some more; he was so charming. Really he was but whatever. "Hey, I'm really sorry about earlier."

"It's cool."

"I didn't mean to be a prick to you, I was just ticked off at my dad. I'm sorry."

"Said it's okay, I already knew that."

"I didn't need to say all that stuff to you. I wasn't .. um ... "

Billy looked up at him. "Can you fuckin' chill out? You didn't even say shit."

"Okay. Uh." Steve ran a hand through his hair and looked down at his lap. "Well, I liked your bathing suit," he said in a stupid voice. Haha!

"Thanks."

"Are we okay?" He was still making his nervous face; it made Billy felt weird or sick or something since he loved him, he guessed. *Some people try to take advantage of that.* Billy hated it when he looked like that. He didn't want Steve to look nervous or upset or unhappy even if they were, like, in a big fight or whatever.

"Yeah, we're fine, man." Billy thought about it. "Sorry if I said somethin' too."

"Uh, you didn't." Steve put his hand on the back of Billy's neck; he didn't move it away for a while. "What do you wanna do, you wanna go back to your place? I didn't know if – uh, I told my mom I'd stay here, help her clean up."

"I can stay for a while. I'll help ya clean up."

"Oh. Okay." Steve looked all surprised. "Thanks."

Henderson popped his head out the back door; he'd finally freed Luke and Leia from the basement and they bounded across the lawn. "STEVE, YOUR MOM SAYS TO BRING YOUR UNCLE MITCH INSIDE!"

Steve glanced over at his uncle all crashed out on the lawn chair; he had a newspaper over his face now. "YEAH, HE'S UNCONSCIOUS."

There was a pause as Henderson relayed this to Mrs. Harrington. "OKAY. SHE SAYS TO THROW HIM IN THE POOL IF YOU CAN."

Steve laughed and looked back at the house. He looked back at Billy, then over at his passed-out uncle. "Think we can pick him up?"

Billy thought about it. "Yeah, probably."

Steve's mom came back out before he and Harrington could try, though. She started arguin' with her brother and Steve got Billy another drink. He helped Harrington collect all the pool chairs.

Notes for the Chapter:

- This took me such a long time to post! I got sick twice in January and was super busy with my job and other RL woes. I wish that I had more time / motivation; once I finally sat down to write this, it took me four nights. I know that this chapter was pretty uneventful, and I still feel like it's not up to the quality of previous parts, so my apologies. I will say that it's probably going to be the last 'fluffy' chapter from Billy's POV, so I hope it was enjoyable! I was being a Bad Writer and wrote, like, 16k of ~Dramatic Conflict for a later chapter (sorry Billy), then remembered, 'Oh, wait, you have to actually write all that other stuff first.'

- I finally wrote up an outline for this fic and it's going to be about 20 chapters. I guess it will definitely be longer than part one, sigh. I still love writing this but I do want it to eventually end; I have more stories I'd like to tell! We finally have an air date for season three and I'd like to finish this by then. Don't know if that will happen, but I'll try!

- The bidding for [Fandom Trumps Hate](#) starts on the 26th at 8pm and ends on the 1st of March if you'd like me to write a story for you (I signed up for three works in the 'unspecified fandoms' category; my page is [here](#)). The bidding starts pretty low - I want to say \$5 - and I doubt I'll be in high demand. It would be cool to do it as I usually need motivation to write something!

14. Chapter Fourteen

Summary for the Chapter:

They all sat out and watched the fire for a while. Max propped her flashlight up atop a boulder that she'd gotten her canvas chair set up by and started writing in her journal.

“You fuckin' nerd, can't believe you brought that thing,” Bill said; he was crashed out at Steve's feet trying to see how many jumbo marshmallows he could shove in his mouth (the answer was five, so far).

Max glared at him and clicked her pen threateningly. “Shut up! Why don't you go read your stupid book!”

“Fuck you,” Billy muttered and dribbled marshmallows down his chin; he was so sexy. “It's too dark out.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally, I can say that there is a sex warning again for this chapter! Nothing super graphic since my writing style sucks, but there's a scene about midway through, lil bit of camping action, and then another scene at the end.

Chapter Fourteen

Work was annoying. Monday was a really long day – most Mondays were. Everything was backed up from the long weekend, and the lights went out twice because there was a crew fixing one of the lines down the street. Linda worked all through lunch and Steve was forced to get pizza with Todd and Craig; they even kinda ruined getting pizza. They'd spent the whole day making comments about

and checking out the new 22-year-old intern who worked in the office on the first floor and it gave Steve a headache. They were so frickin' gross; he hoped that he'd never sounded that way when he'd used to talk about girls.

Finally all the paperwork was finished for the day and Steve got to go home. When he got back to the house, all of his aunts and uncles and cousins were gone already; Mom was good like that. Steve liked his mom's side of the family pretty well and all (especially Aunt Mary, but maybe that was because she was around the most), but it was kind of overwhelming every year when everybody showed up at once. Mom had two brothers and two sisters, but all of their kids were way younger than Steve, so he'd never had anybody to pal around with.

Mom's only sibling that she really liked anyway was Aunt Mary. She'd told Steve before that there had been 'bad blood' in the family ever since her dad had died about six years ago. Steve wasn't really sure what that meant, but it probably had to do with money. Stuff like that usually did.

Steve parked his car and relished the quiet as he got out. All his little cousins were real cute and all but they were so loud; put 'em all together and they were even worse than the Monster Squad. He felt glad that Mom had let him escape to Bill's place on Saturday night. As he walked up the driveway, he noticed that Dad's car was missing from the spot Steve had parked it in yesterday. He looked at the empty space in the driveway and tried hard not to feel annoyed.

It didn't exactly work. Aunt Mary had always used to host the family reunions at her house with her husband; when she'd gotten sick a couple years ago Steve's mom had taken over. Steve was lucky enough not to be involved in the planning or anything but Mom always spent a couple months getting everything ready and sure everybody had their plane tickets and practicin' being nice in her mirror (she was too hilarious).

It was like a big deal for her because she always cared about how everything looked and all, not just the decorations, and this year Steve's dad hadn't even shown up. It hadn't been the first time that he hadn't shown up to something that Mom wanted him to be at, but it

was probably the first time it'd been something actually important. It was just shitty, Steve thought. He had no clue why Mom even wanted Dad around the house but he'd said he would be there. It was shitty to do that to someone you were supposed to be with.

Mom had been real upset, too. She never really got angry or upset like a normal person – she'd never gotten mad at Steve when he'd been a kid and yelled her head off, or smacked at him like a mom on the TV or anything. She'd never done that, even when Steve had done stuff that was majorly stupid, like get shitfaced drunk at Tommy's house at 3pm on Saturday, or, you know, when he threw a party that a girl went missing at.

She'd only actually screamed at him twice in his life: once two years about when they'd been fighting about Nancy (Steve had forgotten what exactly he'd said to his mom, but it had been pretty mean, he thought); the second time had been when he'd been eight and had broken his leg falling off the jungle gym at the park. Anyway the second time she hadn't been mad or whatever, just upset.

She'd asked him about his dad yesterday though, and she never asked about his dad, so Steve knew she'd been upset. It was like embarrassing or something, Steve guessed; her whole family had been askin' all day when Dad was gonna show up.

When Steve had called his dad at his apartment, Dad said that he'd just forgotten and that he was too swamped with work – that was total bullshit because Steve had talked to him about the party the day before. Linda and Joanne had been doing work stuff all weekend too and they'd still shown up. Dad hadn't liked it when Steve pointed that out. Anyway, Dad hadn't even done any work all weekend: he'd been parading his stupid girlfriend around the whole time. He hadn't liked it when Steve pointed that out either.

Dad had gone on one of his usual spiels about how hard he worked and how Steve was ungrateful – it was basically his favorite speech, it seemed. Steve didn't understand how things worked, Dad said; he thought everything could just be handed to him. Dad didn't have to give Steve a job at the company, he said, and did Steve know that? Steve was lucky that he wasn't stuck at some crappy minimum-wage job at the mall, did he want to go and work at the counter of a

goddamn ice cream shop or something? *No, I don't*, Steve had said. Okay, okay. Okay he understood. No he wasn't being flippant. No, *what?* Dad had said like an asshole. *No, SIR, I wasn't*, Steve had said.

He felt crappy about it now, kind of like how he felt when the guys at work were being gross and talkin' about Joanne's tits or something and Steve never bothered to stick up for her. Steve knew that he wasn't actually stupid (well, he was pretty stupid, but not as stupid as Dad said), and he didn't think he was ungrateful. Dad missing out on Mom's party because he was out with somebody else or just didn't want to go had nothing to do with Steve workin' at an ice cream shop (which was totally stupid anyway; he could at *least* work in sporting goods or something) or being flippant. Dad had just been trying to make him feel bad. He should have just let Dad get pissed at him; maybe he would have actually gotten angry enough to come home for once.

Steve's dad was such a prick; it was nothing new. Whenever he got angry he got really defensive right away – maybe Steve was kind of the same. Talkin' to his dad yesterday had gotten him all ticked off. He'd even been a total dickbag to Billy at the party and he really didn't want to do that. They were fine now, he guessed, but it would be cool if he and Bill could go a week without some stupid bullshit happening.

Inside the house Mom was in the kitchen with her papers and she looked up and smiled when Steve came in. Luke and Leia were crashed out on the floor by the big counter island and Luke thumped his tail twice when Steve walked in.

He was still trying to feel less annoyed. “What happened, Dad finally came here and got his car?”

“I wouldn't know, I just got here,” Mom told him. “Perhaps he arranged for someone to pick it up, you know your father's so *very* busy with his work and with his social calls.”

Steve didn't know how his mom could be making jokes or whatever over Dad being a total asshole yesterday. She had to know what his *social calls* were really about.

Bill had told Steve before that when he got real ticked off now he tried to count to ten in his head before he went off; Steve counted to five and calmed himself down. “Why’re the dogs in here, I thought they made your asthma bad or whatever,” he said instead. Luke looked up at him in betrayal but that’s what she’d always used to say.

“I may have been exaggerating about that,” Mom said. “Someone needs to keep me company.” Steve wondered if that was a dig at him or something. “I feel bad, they were locked up all yesterday.”

“I guess.” Steve sat at the counter too and started takin’ his tie off (it was Monday, and Monday sucked, so it was just a beige tie and not a fun one).

“Are you staying home tonight?” Mom asked him. “I’m about to head out to have drinks with Janet in publishing, but I could make you something to eat if you want.”

He’d kind of thought that his mom would be staying home, too – he usually forgot that not everybody was like him and didn’t hate doing stuff on Mondays. Anyway, it was past six so he was surprised that Mom wasn’t *having drinks* already. She wasn’t like an alcoholic or anything, but Steve guessed she kind of drank a lot. Once Tommy’d said that Steve’s mom always had a drink in her hand and now Steve thought about it whenever Mom had a drink in her hand, which was kind of a lot. “Ah, that’s okay. I can just make something later, I’m not hungry yet.”

“Would you like to come with us?”

“I can’t get drinks,” Steve reminded her. Officially, anyway.

Mom smiled at him. “Well, you can have one of mine.” She was too cute or whatever.

“Yeah, that’s okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He wasn’t like a baby who couldn’t be left alone. It was nice that Mom was getting along better with him lately – really nice – but she hadn’t cared too much about that last year, or the year

before. Or even before that he guessed. "I'm fine."

He sat around for a few minutes and made awkward conversation with his mom – sometimes it felt as though he didn't know how to talk to her anymore. Everybody always said that he had a big mouth, but now it was like he wasn't sure what was safe to say. Not just about his stuff with Bill or whatever, or even the crazy stuff that had happened last year with the monsters, but all the crap with Dad too. By now he'd learned it was safer to just not bring that up with his mom. She'd only actually screamed at him twice, but she could get really nasty if she didn't want to talk about something.

Mom went off to get her drinks and Steve was left alone. He thought about calling up Alex or Dustin – Billy had said yesterday that he was going over to visit with Max's mom, so Steve figured he'd leave him alone for once.

Steve laid around on the couch for a while and felt annoyed about work; that was nothing new. He was glad that he was off on Friday but it felt like the rest of the week was going to take forever. He and Max and Bill were finally going camping and Steve had like eighty things planned. He wasn't sure if they'd get to do them all – weather forecaster Billy had said that it was supposed to rain again.

He wondered if Bill or Max even had like actual sneakers or whatever. You couldn't hike a trail in Converse. There was a big lake in the center of the park; he wondered what kinda bathing suit Bill was gonna wear. If it was that red thing he'd worn to the party yesterday then Steve was gonna be in trouble.

The phone rang while he was being a horndog and thinking about swimsuits; it was Billy. He seemed to be good at callin' when Steve was in the middle of his Steve-thoughts. "Yo, you wanna eat dinner with me?"

Steve sat up a little on the couch. "Uh, what, at your – over at Susan's house?" It was Susan's house when Bill's dad wasn't around, at any rate.

"Yeah, if you ain't busy. She asked me 'bout you." Steve didn't answer immediately so Bill went on right away. "Don't have to if you got

plans or whatever.”

“No, I can come over,” Steve told him. “I’m not doing anything.” He probably would have just spent the whole night thinking about Billy anyway.

“Only if you want.”

“Sure, yeah, that’s great.” He felt pretty cheered up and he hadn’t realized he’d needed to be cheered up. Now he didn’t have to cook for himself or eat chips. “Your, uh, your dad won’t be home or anything?”

“Should be okay. Think he’s due back sometime this week.” Billy’s voice changed. “Guess he’s so excited to see Max too.”

Well. That was creepy and Steve didn’t know what to say, especially over the phone. “Are you – are you okay over there?”

“Sure, why?” The line crackled; Steve could picture Billy leaning against the back of the couch at his old place, stretching the faded phone-cord across the room. “It’s just Susan.”

“Yeah, no, I just meant – uh, nevermind. Okay, should I dress nice or whatever?”

There was a long pause in which Steve was sure Billy was grinning like a total prick. “If you want to.”

“Okay, I just have to get ready. I can be like a half hour, when’s she cooking?”

“She ain’t start yet, she’s looking at her cookbooks deciding what to kill me with,” Bill said; Steve heard Susan exclaim something indignantly over the line, then Billy laughed. “Just come over whenever, don’t worry about it.”

“Okay,” Steve said again. “I’ll see you.”

Steve got off the phone and spent a while showering and getting

changed. He knew that Bill and Max thought he was like some preppy country club geek or whatever, but it was important to look nice when you ate with somebody's parents, even moreso if you were datin' that somebody (even if their parents didn't know about). He put his jeans on and a pale blue shirt even though Bill would definitely make fun of him for that. Dustin had totally been right before anyway, Steve did look good in pastels.

He shaved his face and put his cologne on. He spent a while deciding which one to use. He'd bought a new one out in Chicago – Linda and Joanne had sprayed him with a ton of shit at the mall and picked it out for him. *Very mature*, Linda had said approvingly; Steve hoped that didn't mean he smelled like a grandpa or something. Nancy had said once that perfume or cologne gave her a headache so he'd gotten into the habit of never wearing too much. He guessed he'd find out what Bill liked.

He played with Luke and Leia for a few minutes and let them outside for the night, then drove himself over to Billy's house – well, his parents' house or whatever. He hoped he wasn't late or anything. It almost felt like he was picking Bill up for a date or whatever, like when he'd used to eat dinner over at the Wheelers' before he and Nancy would go out somewhere.

Susan's old grey Explorer was parked in the driveway and Steve remembered that Bill's car was still in the shop. Maybe he should have asked him if he'd needed a ride anywhere earlier – Bill hadn't said anything on the phone.

Billy let him in when he knocked on the door. The TV was on and the radio was on in the kitchen and something was burning in there, too; that wasn't exactly like the Wheelers' house. “Hey fancypants,” Bill said like a total nerd (Steve was just wearing jeans). “You smell good, you get a new cologne?”

Heh. “Yeah, I wore it for you,” Steve told him; Billy rolled his eyes and wandered off into the kitchen.

Steve watched his ass as he walked away. Billy was wearing the jeans that he liked with all the holes in them.

“Quit eyeing me up, asshole,” Bill said without turning around. Steve followed him over to the table.

It felt kind of strange to be at Billy's old place even though his dad wasn't around. It seemed like Bill had been at the apartment for about forever now, instead of only two months. He and Steve had mostly been alone there, or with the Monster Squad, and Steve wasn't quite sure how to act around Susan anymore. He'd never really thought about it before, but he guessed Billy wouldn't want her to know about them. Steve figured he had to behave. It was nice that she'd asked him over, though.

Susan had a big plate of Italian bread out that she'd sliced up; she moved about setting the table and wouldn't let Steve help her. It was one of the first times that Steve hadn't seen her all dressed up for her job – she looked way younger without her hair pinned back. “You don't need to do anything, you're a guest.”

“Thought I was a guest,” Bill said all cranky from over at the counter.

“Steve is a newer guest, he just got here,” Susan said. She watched Billy butter a slice of bread and start to eat it. “Oh, my goodness, Billy, please wash your hands, I honestly can't bear it.”

Bill stuffed the bread in his mouth and stalked over to the sink like an obedient troll. He was too funny: he was always hollering that nobody told him what to do. “Jesus. I fuc – frickin' washed up at work, you think I just rolled in motor oil and came over here?” He did kind of have a lot of grease marks on his red t-shirt.

“Honestly, it looks that way,” Susan told him, echoing Steve's thoughts; Billy turned and raised his eyebrows at her like he was amused.

Steve watch him turn the faucet on. “I was doin' a bunch of stuff all day, Hank threw his goddamn back out again, actually had to take himself to the doctor.”

“Really? Were you by yourself?” Steve asked. Bill always acted like Steve had this real important job, but all he did was do paperwork and fix the printer for Linda. Billy had to do way more shit.

“Yeah, it wasn't really busy or anything. Hank does it all the time. I had a couple people come in 'round one, you see that wreck out on the 541?” Bill asked Susan.

“They were cleaning up all the mess as I was coming home. What happened?”

“Some asshole ran a stoplight and wiped out.” Billy looked up and grinned at his stepmom's face. “Sorry. Assbag.”

“You're funny,” Susan told him dryly. She squeezed by him at the counter and handed him a dishtowel to dry his hands off on as she passed. The towel had kittens on it; Steve laughed at the face Bill made. “Is Hank all right? I know he was having trouble before.”

“Called me and talked for 'bout forty-five minutes, think he's okay.”

It still felt super weird to be over at Bill's house and Steve guessed that Bill felt strange about it too. He was still just acting like Billy, but something about him seemed kinda different – subdued or quiet or something. Maybe it was just in Steve's head or maybe he worried about Bill too much or whatever.

Aside from Bill's graduation party, Steve hadn't really been over to the house since that horrible stretch of time at the start of summer when Billy and El had been missing. It wasn't like he'd really stayed over frequently before or anything – Bill mostly came to his place – but Steve had felt good here the few times he'd been invited, or had just been hanging out with Bill in his room.

Most of the furniture here was older or kind of worn out, mismatched – not that it mattered, or that Steve really noticed that kind of thing. Billy seemed too bright now for the house, out of place, almost like he didn't really belong there anymore. He kept moving too much and talking too much; he kept looking over at the side-door like he expected his dad to come bursting in or something. They were just making dinner.

After a couple minutes Susan got tired of Billy fidgeting and sent him back over to the fridge. She'd bought a package of salad from the grocery store and she told Billy to set it out.

Bill looked horrified. "Why?"

"Humor me, please," Susan said. "Would you like something to drink?" she asked Steve. "Billy, we have actual Cokes right now, Max hasn't been here to slurp them all down."

"You really wanna give me and Harrington all your fancy soda? It ain't a holiday." Bill was clinking around in the fridge. He opened up a Tupperware container and made a face down into it.

"Can you quit talking and serve me?" Steve asked him. "You're bein' pretty rude, I'm kind of a guest here."

Bill gave him a real smart look that said he'd had a lot to serve him if Susan wasn't around. He gave Steve a Coke though.

Susan had made a spaghetti pie which Steve had never seen before – it did look kind of weird. Billy made a bunch of comments like a dramatic person but Steve ate three slices even though the noodles on the top layer were kind of crunchy. No, the sauce was fine, he assured Susan; it was completely edible, really.

"Billy! Do you need to do all that?" Susan asked Bill as he choked his way through the smallest piece. "And in front of your friend, too?"

Bill was cycling through this series of really stupid grimaces while he ate; he could make his eyes widen so much that it looked like they were going to pop out of his head. He looked over at Steve. "What, him? He feeds me worse shit than this all the time."

"No I don't, I don't know what you're talking about," Steve said. *One time* he had made breakfast for them at his place, and Billy had acted like Steve was trying to murder him because he'd put peppers and onions in an omelet. That was what made it an omelet. There had been cheese too. "I think it's great, Mrs. Mayfield. It's really good."

"Steve, you're such a sweetheart. Thank you," Susan said. Bill made a face at Steve being a suck-up so Steve made one back.

One side of the pie or casserole or whatever it was was way more burnt than the other half; Billy crunched on something loudly and then winced. "Oh, Christ, I think that was my frickin' tooth."

"Hm. It's probably rotting out of your mouth from all that filthy language you use," Susan told him blandly. Bill looked delighted by her. "I'm going to need you to stop teasing me, can you do that for five minutes?"

"I dunno."

"I'll have you know this is perfectly safe, Mrs. Henderson gave me the recipe. She has a lot of cookbooks."

"Oh, yeah, I got some of 'em too."

"Maxine told me you made a pot roast the other week."

"What, you did?" Steve asked, hurt. He'd been over at Bill's apartment a ton and he definitely had not seen any pot roast, or even leftovers.

"It wasn't great or nothing. She gave me a Crock-Pot too," Bill told him.

"Really?"

"Yeah, when we was over there the other month. Dustin and Sinclair loaded up all that sh – stuff into my car."

Huh. "Oh, I don't remember that." Dust was always bringing weird shit over to Bill's place, though.

"Was that night Mrs. Henderson said I had a farmer's tan," Bill said; Susan snorted into her soda and almost choked. She cough twice and then wiped her mouth off with her napkin.

Billy slid his gaze over to her. "See what happens when you laugh at people?" he said. Susan just smiled at him so Bill fidgeted away some more.

Finally Steve had eaten enough; Susan cleared the table and wouldn't let him or Billy help. When she was finished they all went out into the living room and Steve and Billy sat down on the little couch. Susan stood off to the side of it for a moment, looking down at Billy.

“Your hair grows so fast, you don't even know how lucky you are. You too, Steve,” she said. She laid her hand on the top Billy's head like he was a little kid and ran her fingers through his hair a couple times, smoothed it down against the back of his neck where his hair was long enough to curl over his shirt-collar already. “Are you going to cut it again or let it grow?”

Bill sat stock-still like a weirdo and let Susan play with his hair for a couple long seconds; he looked like he didn't know what to do. He always did the same thing when Steve touched him too, or when Max or El gave him a hug. His eyes were kinda big again; he looked like a tiger or something that was trying hard to act tame. “Uh, I dunno,” he said finally.

Susan took her hand out of his hair; she smiled down at Billy like he was being funny. She straightened up and looked over at Steve. “I have ice cream in the freezer, you can help yourself.”

Well. Steve wasn't going to say no to ice cream. He hoped it was chocolate. “Okay, thanks.”

“You didn't have to buy all this shit for us,” Billy told her.

Susan still looked like he was being funny. Steve knew that Billy would never say it, and he'd kill Steve if he ever said it, probably, but Bill was kind of like Susan's kid too, even if he didn't live there anymore. “There was a sale. Don't worry, we'll still make the mortgage.” Billy rolled his eyes and didn't answer.

Steve went and got his ice cream – it was chocolate, and they had cookie dough too. He leaned around the kitchen doorframe and peered back out into the living room. “Do you want something?” he asked Bill.

“I guess.” Billy had Susan next to him on the couch now and it looked like they were deep in conversation after just a moment; they both looked up at Steve and stopped talking. He almost felt like he was interrupting or something.

“Okay.” Steve went back to his ice cream. He kinda remembered where all the bowls and stuff were here; he spent a couple minutes

going through the cabinets and finding everything he needed.

He could hear Bill and Susan talking out in the other room, the low murmur of their voices. Even so he couldn't quite hear what they were saying, not that he really wanted to snoop or eavesdrop or anything. Bill said sharply, "No, I said I don't want you to do that," and Susan answered him in a hushed voice. "Don't worry about it," Bill said.

After another moment Susan came back and popped her head through the kitchen doorway. "I have to run to the store for a few minutes, you guys can watch the TV," she told Steve.

Steve had been shoveling ice cream into his mouth and he felt silly. "Oh. Okay. Uh, thanks."

Susan left, jangling her car keys; Steve watched out the window as she walked slowly down the gravel driveway and got into her SUV.

He went back over to the doorway to the living room. Bill had the TV on with the sound muted. "Hey, what'd she have to go out and get? I woulda brought something if I knew she was gonna run out of stuff."

Billy flopped his head against the back of the couch and looked at him upside-down. Even in the dim light of the one living-room lamp, his eyes looked really blue, almost startling. He always looked so good, even covered in motor oil or dirt from his job. "I know, right? Nah, it wasn't that, she had'ta get a blank tape for her soaps this week or whatever."

Oh. Mom stuff. *General Hospital* was really intense during the summer, or so Steve had heard. "Oh, okay. What d'ya want on your ice cream?"

"I dunno, what's she got?"

"Uh – " Steve leaned back into the kitchen to take inventory – "chocolate syrup, we got those mini-marshmallows, like three kinds of jimmies – " he stopped when Bill snorted and made a great face. "What?" Billy laughed. "What?"

"Yeah, we call them sprinkles, you dodo."

Jesus H. Billy was *such* a snob. “You live in the midwest now, Bill, you need to assimilate and learn the lingo.” Assimilate was an SAT word; Bill grinned at him like he was impressed (he should be – Steve was pretty sure he'd even pronounced it right, too). “We got, uh, chocolate jimmies, we got those weird ones you use at Christmas, we got rainbow jimmies, we got – ”

Bill scrunched his face up; he looked really cute or whatever. “Jesus, shut up,” he said. He was still making the cute face, upside-down. “Rainbow jimmies sounds like a fuckin' gay bar.” He made Steve laugh too much.

“Yeah, you'd probably like it there.”

He thought maybe Bill would get ticked off but he just laughed too. “Maybe,” he said. “Okay, gimme the chocolate ones.”

“Okay.”

He got Billy his ice cream; he always liked to mix the flavors just like Steve did (compatibility in a relationship was important). There was an *Unsolved Mysteries* marathon on the TV and Bill turned the volume up. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the couch together and Bill told him some more about the bullshit he'd had to deal with at the shop today. He even held Steve's hand until Susan got back. That made it kind of difficult to eat the ice cream but Steve didn't mind. It wasn't real sexy-like or anything but it was really nice.

Steve knew to move a couple inches away when Bill's stepmom came back in. She got out her knitting stuff and showed Steve the new scarf she was making for Max. It was green instead of pink; she'd finally taken the hint. Bill said he didn't know why she was doin' a scarf in the summertime but Susan said that maybe by the time fall hit she'd almost be done.

They watched the TV while Susan knitted and she and Bill talked, mostly about Max. She hadn't called her mom yet with her daily update and Susan seemed surprised when Billy told her that Max seemed kind of down. Bill tried to backtrack: “Guess her dad's been working a lot.”

Susan made a little face; she was biting the inside of her cheek. She started a new row on her scarf. "Well, it's nice that he's finally doing that now," she said lightly. "He never really knew what to do with her. Not that *I* do, she's always been so unlike me. It's nice that she has you boys to pal around with."

Steve looked over at Billy and somehow they both managed not to make a comment. "Are you still going on your trip this weekend?" Susan asked them. "Did you decide where you're going to? Just so I know, if anything happens."

"Uh, I think we're gonna go out to Worster Lake," Steve said. The lake was pretty big and it was in Potato Creek State Park; Max and Bill had laughed and picked the park with the dorkiest name out of the choices Steve had given them. There were lots of places to camp and a couple hiking trail. "It's only like two hours away, kinda near South Bend."

"Max is so excited. She said it's going to be better than back at home, you two never went hiking anywhere, did you? I can't remember." Susan looked over at Billy.

Bill was stretched out on the couch with his ice cream bowl on his stomach and his faded black boots up on the coffee table; Susan hadn't yelled at him for it yet. He raked a hand through his hair, messing it up. "Used to pitch that stupid tent for her in the backyard, you 'member?"

"Oh! Oh, that's right. She made me turn the light off in the kitchen when she was out there, she said it ruined the atmosphere." Bill laughed. "Do you remember when she watched *Sleepaway Camp*?"

Billy laughed again; it made Steve smile. "Yeah, woke me up screaming her frickin' head off, I almost pissed myself. Why'd you let her put that crap on?"

"I didn't know it was a horror movie!" Susan said; her knitting needles clinked together. "It was on the TV," she explained to Steve. "I just thought it was, you know, like a comedy – um, what's that movie with Bill Murray?"

“*Caddyshack*,” Billy said like a nerd.

“No. The camping one.”

“Oh, yeah, *Meatballs*,” Steve said. He and Dust loved that one. He laughed a little, thinking about it. Bill said, “Oh, my *god*.”

“What? Have you even seen it?”

“Of course I've seen it, you think I live under a rock?”

“We should watch it before we go this weekend,” Steve told him; Bill puffed his cheeks out like Max and didn't answer him (he looked totally dumb).

“Well, I thought it was more like that, not a, a *slasher* or, or whatever you say,” Susan said.

She was funny. “Yeah, I don't know if that's such a great movie for, like, a ten-year-old to watch either,” Steve told her.

“Well, they edit out all the bad parts on the TV.”

Steve guessed that was true enough. Susan talked to them some more, then Steve and Billy got up and did the dishes for her. Susan fluttered about after them and said it wasn't necessary a couple times until Bill told her to quit squawking and sit back down. After that she packed up the rest of the spaghetti for both of them to take home. It was almost ten so Steve decided he should go.

Bill walked him to the front door and out onto the steps; Steve watched him light up a cigarette. The flickering bulb from the porch light shone dimly on them; it made Billy's hair look lighter and his shirt look like blood. “You wanna hang out or whatever?”

Steve always wanted to hang out. It usually led to hooking up, and he had new ideas, especially after this weekend. It was pretty late, though – well, for a Monday when they both had work. “I can come over after Max gets back. You gonna stay here longer?”

“Yeah, I dunno.” Billy took a long drag off his cig and handed it over to Steve. He looked kind of hesitant or something, like it wasn't okay

for him to even hang around his house. Steve remembered how upset Bill had been last month when he'd had to see his dad or whatever. *I forgot I was scared of him.* His dad wasn't here *now*, but it probably still felt like he was. Steve could understand that.

"You know, it's okay if you want to hang out with your stepmom or whatever," he told Billy. The cigarette burned his throat a little and he managed not to make a face; he guessed that he really only smoked when he was around Billy now.

Bill rolled his eyes and leaned with his hip against the rickety porch railing that ran along the base of the house. "I don't want to hang out with her, I ain't fuckin' five years old."

"Okay." Steve was done with the smoke so he handed it back over. "She probably likes having you here. Seems kinda lonely."

"I guess."

"You gonna be okay?" Steve asked him.

Bill raised his eyebrows like Steve was being cute or funny or something. Steve watched him take another drag and blow some smoke out of his nose like a demon. "Yeah, you don't gotta worry about me."

"I'm not, I was just asking," Steve lied.

"I'm good here, man."

"Do you want a ride home later?"

Bill still looked like he was being cute. Sometimes, even now, Steve couldn't tell if that was good or bad. "What, you gonna come back over here in an hour and get me?"

"Uh, if you want. It doesn't matter." He probably wouldn't get to sleep for a long time anyway; he hadn't last night.

"Yeah, that's okay, man. We can hang later." He clapped Steve on the shoulder with his hand that was holding the cigarette; some of the ash from the cherry flaked down onto Steve's shirt. "Whoops. Walk ya

to your car, Sue's gonna think we're neckin' out here.”

If only. Steve let Bill walk him to his car.

It was hard to get to sleep like usual when he wasn't at Billy's place – that was probably stupid or whatever. The hotel had been weird but different than Steve's own house, which still seemed too big and empty now, too dark. There was too much time to think when he was alone.

He stayed awake for a long time and went into work all cranky. Joanne said that the week was finally catching up to her; Steve guessed it was the same for him. It probably hadn't been a good idea to drink at the hotel with Linda and Joanne for three nights straight and then to drink all Sunday at his mom's party, too. “But it was so much *fuun*,” Joanne moaned, slumping over her desk.

Tuesday was also the day that Max came back from California. Steve figured Bill would want to have his cute reunion with her so he really did leave Billy alone. He went and hung out at the Hendersons' with Dustin to do damage control: Dust was pitching a racket on account of being left behind while Steve was going camping over the weekend. Steve couldn't really picture Dustin hiking or setting up a tent or being away from his precious science books for more than a day, but it was nice to hang out with him. They watched a movie with Mrs. Henderson and Dust gave him even more leftovers to bring back with him, then Steve got to go home and have another sleepless night.

Wednesday took forever to go by and then finally he got to go over to Bill's place. Dad called him as he was gettin' ready to leave which was always a fun time.

Dad rambled on about pointless shit like he usually did for about five minutes – he should know by now that Steve didn't really follow baseball anymore. He asked Steve a couple questions about Mom and

Steve wondered why he cared. He hadn't cared three days ago.

"Listen, Steve," Dad said; Steve rolled his eyes all around the kitchen. "I want to apologize about Sunday, all right? That was my fault, and I should have remembered. I talked to your mother, and she said –"

"Why're you askin' me about Mom if you already talked to her?"

"Well, I wanted to know if she said anything to you," Dad said (Steve rolled his eyes again). "Hey, I shouldn't have snapped at you on the phone, it was a long weekend. No hard feelings right?"

"Whatever." Dad didn't say anything so Steve said, "Yeah, it doesn't matter." Maybe it should matter but it didn't. Steve had always used to get really worked up when Dad would start his petty bullshit with him – he was tired of doing that. He'd used to try so hard: when he was a kid, he'd stay up all night studying – or *trying* to study, at any rate – to try and get a good grade so that his dad would say something nice to him for once, or memorize the sports stats in the paper so that they'd have something to talk about. He was really tired of trying.

"We should do something soon, you know, you and me. We can hang out this weekend if you wanna, do whatever you want."

"I won't be here, I'm going camping." Steve'd already told him that last weekend, too.

"Oh, I didn't know that." There was this awkward silence. "Where are you gonna go? Did you start hangin' out with Tommy again? I 'member when you kids went out –"

"Yeah, I'm not going with him, I actually have other friends aside from Tommy," Steve interrupted. Okay – actually, Billy was a little bit more than a friend, but Steve guessed that his dad didn't really need to know about all that right now. It would be great to see his face, though – he'd probably have a brain hemorrhage or something. If he survived the hemorrhage, though, it would definitely be bad. Okay. Steve shouldn't joke about shit like that.

"I know you have other friends," Dad was saying. "I didn't mean to

say – ”

“Hey, Dad, I'm sorry, I was actually about to head out, you caught me goin' out the door.”

“Oh. All right. All right, I'll let you go. Sorry, Steve. Have fun, okay? Don't do anything I wouldn't do,” Dad said like a total nerd.

“Thanks, I won't.”

Finally Dad hung up the phone and Steve was free to go. He tried to push the conversation out of his mind as he got into his car and headed down Fairview; he didn't want to be in a bad mood when he got to Bill's place.

Even so, he still felt kind of crappy, anyway – not just because of Dad. He'd had a headache all day from not sleeping again, this incessant pounding behind his eyeballs that always made him want to pull them right out of his skull. His stomach felt all twisted up, too, not really in a sick way like he was gonna throw up, but maybe from anxiety or something. Dust had said before that stress ulcers were real things; Steve hoped he wasn't finally getting one. He didn't really want to go over to Bill's to hang out while he was feeling sick, but he definitely didn't want to stay home again, either. Really, he guessed he just wanted to see Billy.

It had already gotten way colder outside since Steve had gotten home from work; he almost ran back inside and got a jacket. Mom was always watching her specials on the TV about climate change and then lecturing him about it for eighty hours, but Steve was pretty sure it was supposed to be getting hotter outside, not colder. It was the end of July – it shouldn't feel like autumn already. He did what Lucas called the *white-boy jog* out to his car and started the engine up.

There was about a million kids bouncing around in Bill's apartment already, which was about what Steve had expected. Dust had been keeping up tradition and callin' Steve at work every Wednesday still, even though there was no school to be stressed about; he'd said everybody wanted to see Max.

Dustin was already there like Steve had figured – he and Rebecca and

Mike were crashed out on the floor in front of the TV with a huge stack of board games between them all. Over in the kitchen, Billy was over at the counter deep in conversation with Lucas and Will (freshly back from camp, Steve guessed), and Max and her friend Beverly were talkin' away a mile a minute together on the fancy red couch. Nobody even noticed Steve right away which didn't exactly elevate his mood. He closed the front door and then wondered if he should close it again a second time, like in a sitcom.

"Hi Steve!" Dust said from his spot by the TV.

Max looked up and beamed. "*STEVE!*" She flung herself across the room and gave him a big hug; Steve guessed that made him feel kind of good. "I missed you! I got you stuff!"

"Sure, I missed you too." Steve let her drag him over to the couch. He guessed he didn't really have to worry about Lucas gettin' all jealous over him anymore, ha-ha. "I got you stuff too, it's still in my car."

"Yo, quit hoggin' my goddamn boyfriend," Bill said all crabby from the counter; that made Steve feel good too.

"Come over here and say hi to me," he said so Bill stalked over and leaned against the back of the couch. "Hi."

"Yeah, hi," Bill said, still crabby. He slung his arms over Steve's shoulders and rested his chin atop Steve's head for a moment; Steve couldn't tell if that made his headache better or worse. When he tilted his head back to look up, Billy leaned over and kissed him, upside-down, two times.

Steve felt surprised. He guessed he'd wanted a kiss – he hadn't gotten one on Monday – but there were a lot of kids around right now. Nobody screamed or anything, though, which was good because Steve didn't feel like kicking anyone's butt while he had a headache. He guessed the guys were too invested in their boardgames. He tried to think if he and Bill had ever kissed in front of the guys before; he didn't think they had. "Happy?" Bill asked him.

"I guess," Steve said, so Billy leaned over again.

"A-hem," Max said like a fifty-year-old schoolteacher. When Steve glanced over, she and Bev were leaning together and watching them with varying expressions on their dumb little faces (Max looked grossed out; Beverly looked decidedly less so).

Bev put her head in her hands, elbows against her knees. "Don't mind us, you can keep going," she said like a creep.

Steve ignored her; he looked back up at Billy. "You taste like Fritos."

"Don't flirt with me."

"A-HEM!" Max said again. She stretched across Steve, knocking against his shoulder for a moment, to smack at Billy. "COMMUNAL AREA, BILLY! God! Can I show him my stuff or what?"

"What, I ain't stoppin' you."

Max had actually gotten him a lot of cute stuff and Steve tried not to feel too emotional. Probably she'd bought a bunch of crap for everybody, but he hadn't really thought she'd be thinking of him. She'd gotten him this road map of California, one of the fancy laminated ones, like a poster or something ("See, now you know what the PCH is," she teased him). A baseball cap that said *Newport Beach* on it and a bunch of matches from different stores on the boardwalk: three of them had naked ladies on them. Steve wasn't sure how she'd known that he liked tacky stuff like that. There was one of those fancy glass bottles that had sand poured in it – the sand was bleached-white from the sun and it looked awesome. It had a little shell in it, one of the spiral ones.

"This is totally cool, I'm gonna put these all up in my room," Steve told her.

Max puffed her cheeks out and grinned at him all pleased; that made him feel really good too. She'd gotten a little tanned and it made her freckles look darker. "I didn't have a lot of money, I couldn't really get you anything cool. I GOT YOU a foam lizard too but SOMEONE BROKE IT ALREADY!" She whipped her head around and sent a scathing look over towards Dustin.

“Oh, my god, STEVE, that stupid thing was so cheap, it basically unraveled as soon as she walked it in here,” Dust yapped. Steve didn't know what a foam lizard was, anyway, or how you could walk it somewhere.

Max said that she'd been stuck inside a lot anyway because her dad had been working; she'd made Steve one of those dorky friendship bracelets, too, like girls always did up at recess or at camp or whatever.

“Max, are you serious? He's gonna get fuckin' beat up if he wears that shit.” Bill started up with his commentary; he was still leaning over Steve.

Max ignored him. “Billy wouldn't put his on either. Look, green's for you and purple's me,” she told Steve importantly, showing him. Steve nodded real serious since it seemed to matter to her.

“I'll put it on my keychain.”

Dustin was lumbering over and making Steve's headache way worse. “Max, where's my bracelet?”

“I ran out of string for your fat wrist,” Max snapped.

“Ha ha, you're funny, I've lost three inches already this summer!” Dust went on; Billy started laughing.

“Why do you know that?” Steve asked him.

“Uh, because *my mom* – “

“God, we don't need to hear it again!” Bev said. Steve suddenly got a horrible mental image of Mrs. Henderson measurin' Dustin's hips with her fabric tape or something.

“So, what, are you guys having a game night or something?” Steve asked him to try and get rid of the terrifying image.

Six of out six little brats started going off at once; Bill was saying *No, we're not!* loudly over them. “You *said* we could do what I wanted!” Max squawked. She told Steve that they were going to order food and

then she was going with Lucas, Dustin, and Rebecca to see *The Lost Boys* at nine-thirty (it seemed like Max had been waiting about half a year for that stupid movie). “You and Billy can come, too, obviously.”

“Oh, can we?” Bill asked her.

“He's my ride,” Max informed Steve smartly. “We can triple date!”

He didn't even have to look up to see the face that Bill was making. Anyway: “Yeah, that's great. We can take my car.”

The kids talked and talked; Max and Bev made room for Billy on the couch and he crashed down next to Steve. The Monster Squad was kind of seriously messing up his mojo, even though he was happy to see Max and all.

“Okay? You look tired,” Bill said.

Steve felt cranky: *You look tired* is what everyone said when they meant you looked like shit. “I'm good.”

Billy scrubbed a hand through Steve's hair and ruffled it up; that was kind of annoying since fixing his hair had been, like, the one thing Steve had done before he'd left his house earlier. He took hold of Billy's wrist and pulled his arm away. “You screwed up my hair.”

“Yeah, you look like a turd now.” Bill was grinning at him and it made him feel less annoyed. “I still like ya, though.”

All right. It wasn't fair of Billy to act all cute when Steve wanted to be in a mood. He was starting to give Steve the stupid gushy-crush feeling again. He resolved not to blush like an idiot on Bill's couch with Max and Beverly watching them like a soap opera. “Thanks.”

“Eye's all red.” Bill poked at a spot on his cheekbone which was less cute.

“Probably from my contacts,” Steve told him. He hadn't thought that it was, like, obvious that he didn't feel really good – he mostly felt okay. Maybe he wasn't talking too much or something; you'd think Bill would be happy. “I have a headache,” he said anyway. “My stomach hurts.”

“Knew it,” Bill said away; Steve rolled his eyes.

He felt kind of stupid – he'd just wanted to see Bill all day like usual, but maybe it wasn't a great idea to have come over here when he didn't feel great, especially with all the kids hanging around and being loud as hell. Billy wasn't exactly, like, a sympathetic girlfriend or whatever.

Then again, that wasn't really fair. The last time they'd been together at Steve's house and he'd gotten a really bad headache, Billy had been pretty cool, and had given him an amazing blowjob. Then Steve had asked him out on a date, so, well. That'd worked out okay. And Bill had been so great lately - not just since their fight (before that, too), but ... okay, especially since their fight. He'd even written Steve's college entrance essay for him: nobody had ever really put so much effort into doing something for him before. There were definitely reasons why Steve wanted to be around Billy all the time.

Bill was still smiling at him. “Told ya not to eat that spaghetti thing,” he said; Steve stared blankly for a moment and then made a face.

“Okay, it's, it's not from the stupid pie, that was like two days ago.”

“Too much sodium,” Bill continued like a nerd.

“I can't believe you ate so much of Mom's cooking, you're so brave,” Max yapped in support.

“It wasn't that bad.” He looked over at Billy. “Hey, did I leave my glasses over here?”

“Yeah, in my room still.” That was so far away.

It was nearly six on the dot which meant that Dustin immediately started up about how hungry he was; it was time for first dinner. All the kids started arguing about whether or not they should get food – Mike said he had to call his house and make sure that his mom wasn't expecting him home (he was being super grouchy: he'd thought El would be over, but Steve guessed she was still quarantining herself). Rebecca said she could eat at the movies because Will could get her free food, and Bev and Max wanted hoagies.

Bill said he'd go to the corner store and get stuff for everybody. "You want a sandwich or somethin'?" he asked Steve.

"Uh, I'm not that hungry." Just the thought of food kinda made his stomach lurch; he felt like a baby or something. He felt disappointed in himself: he hadn't even eaten first dinner yet, either.

"Okay. You wanna split a cheese steak with me?"

He guessed he could manage that. "Okay."

Billy rolled his eyes when Steve started to take his wallet out. "I don't need your money, man, I can get you a freaking sandwich."

"Uh, Billy, I need onion rings," Dustin announced.

"Do *you* got money?" Bill asked him; Dust's face fell.

"It's for the card game!"

"Maybe you can win it back," Max said sweetly. Dustin looked deeply skeptical.

Bill went back over to the kitchen counter and took his wallet out of his jean jacket as the kids shouted out their orders. Steve watched him count out his cash slowly, chewing on his bottom lip. He slid his wallet into his back pocket and then looked up sharply. "Hey, Lucas. Walk over with me."

Lucas was over at the table with Mike now; he looked up in surprise. "What? I – yeah, I don't have any money."

"I didn't ask you if you had any money, I said fuckin' come with me," Bill told him patiently.

"Oh. Um ... okay. Sure." He pushed himself up out of his chair in a weirdly stiff manner and followed Bill over to the front door. He kind of looked like he was expecting to get murdered.

"Back in twenty." Billy stalked out of the apartment with Lucas in tow.

Dustin made one of his weird gurgling sounds (Steve had begged him like eighty thousand times not to do that). “Okay, why does he get to go with Billy?”

Steve and Max exchanged a glance. Max had a funny look on her face; she glanced over at him and raised her eyebrows up. Wordlessly, they both got up and crowded over at the little window in the kitchen to spy on Bill and Lucas.

“What are you guys *doing*?” Beverly was laughing at them. Steve and Max ignored her.

“Do you think they're getting along or something?” Max whispered to him all covert as they peered out the window. They probably looked like total idiots. “Billy said Lucas was over here this weekend, was he with you guys?”

That was news to Steve. “Uh, I don't know, I only got back on Saturday night.”

Max narrowed her eyes and squashed her nose against the windowpane; Steve tried not to laugh at her. “I hope they're not talking about me.”

“Yeah, I think you're okay.”

It felt kind of weird to talk about Bill and Lucas with Max. Obviously Lucas was, you know, her boyfriend or whatever, so Steve guessed of course she'd want Billy to get along with him. Sometimes he forgot that she *definitely* didn't know about all the stuff that had gone down between the three of them back in June; he didn't know what-all Bill had said to her, or what Lucas had. Steve certainly wasn't going to be the one to bring it up with her.

Even if she didn't *know* know, she had to know that Billy was – well. How he was. That was why they were both crowding at the window, Steve guessed. He still didn't like to think about it, all the awful stuff Bill had said about Lucas before. It still made him feel kind of sick, like that hadn't really been the Billy he knew talkin'.

But Bill had been so different lately anyway. Obviously he could

change; everybody could. And if Lucas was okay with him, well – it still didn't make it okay or anything. But Steve guessed it could be all right.

Billy and Lucas finally appeared out on the sidewalk and crossed the park together. It was windy and kind of grey out even though the sun wouldn't be setting yet for another hour. Bill had his hands in his jeans pockets and Steve could see the bright red of the bandana that Lucas always wore even from here, even with his crappy eyesight.

Lucas leaped off the curb like a gangly cricket. He started walking backwards and talking to Billy; he had a big grin on his face. Whatever he said made Bill throw his head back and laugh. Lucas looked up and pointed at them so Bill turned around and flipped them off, still walking. Steve and Max ducked down at the window like a pair of geeks (Bev was still laughing at them).

The rest of the kids, even Mike, took this as an opportunity to crowd around Steve and started bombarding him with questions about being in the city. Steve hadn't seen Will for a while so he asked him about camp too. Usually he didn't mind being crowded by the Monster Squad but tonight it almost felt like too much, like how he usually felt when his house was stuffed full with a bunch of relatives he didn't really know. Everyone was *really* frickin' loud.

Somehow he made it back to the couch and continued to be talked at – it took about twelve forevers for Bill to get back with Lucas. Steve watched as they unloaded all their food. Bill had got Dustin his onion rings even though Dust hadn't actually given him any money. “Hey, you want something to drink?” he asked Steve; he was with Will over at the counter again and already inhaling like fifty french fries.

“I'm good.”

“Okay, final offer.” Billy shrugged and commenced stuffing his face.

Steve curled his lip up at him for a second; he was totally gonna over-eat again and then be all tired and grouchy and not want to hook up later. Not that Steve felt particularly sexy at the moment, he guessed. That sucked because he always wanted to do stuff. All the kids were around, though. Either way, he couldn't help it: “Bill, don't eat too

much.”

Billy made one of his demon faces and shoveled even more fries into his mouth; Steve rolled his eyes.

The phone on the kitchen wall rang and Billy glanced over his shoulder, then leaned across Will to pick it up. “Yeah, whatdya want?” He was so charming. “Oh. Hey.” A strange look flashed across his face; he tugged a corner of his lower lip between his teeth. “Yeah, where else would she be? Oh. Okay. Yeah, sure ... she said ... uh, okay.” His voice got lower and he turned away from the counter. Steve watched as Bill trained his gaze out the window as if there was something real interesting on the balcony.

The couch shuddered dangerously and Steve looked over; Dustin was collapsing down beside him. “Hey, are you in on the card game?” He shoved an onion ring in Steve's face.

Ugh. Steve pushed his hand away. He really didn't feel like playing cards for three hours, and the movie at nine-thirty seemed a long time away. “Nah, I don't think so. I don't feel so hot.”

“Oh. Sorry. Why'd you come over here if you don't feel good?”

Jesus H. Steve narrowed his eyes – he felt too grumpy to answer him. It didn't matter, but he knew that he probably wasn't being super fun right now or whatever. He reached over and grabbed an onion ring after all. “Shut up.”

Bill finally finished on the phone. He hung it up and sprawled across the counter again. “Yo, Max, sorry, you gotta jet.”

“Huh?” Max looked up from where she was still gabbing away with Beverly over on the smaller couch. “Why?”

“That was your mom, wants you to come home.”

“Okay.” She shrugged and turned back to Bev. “I'll leave in a while.”

Billy didn't answer her for a moment. He was just looking over at Max, almost as if he was hesitating or something. It was totally weird to see: Steve watched him chew on his lip. “Yeah, she said she wants

you to go now.”

“*Why?*” Max's little forehead furrowed dangerously and Steve could already see the storm brewing. “She said it was fine earlier!”

Bill was quiet again. “Guess she wants ya home for dinner.”

“Why? I just got stuff here!”

“It's just what she said.”

Max scoffed and shifted back against the couch cushion, crossing her arms and almost sending her food toppling to the floor. “What, is *your dad* back or something? Did he tell her to *call here* and collect me?”

“I don't fuckin' know.” He narrowed his eyes back at her. “Just go and eat with 'em, all right?”

“No, that's not fair! She said I could stay here earlier!”

Billy leaned against the counter with his head cradled against his palm. His eyes flicked around at the rest of the kids lookin' at them. “Yeah, well, now she said she wants you to go home.”

“That's not *fair!*” Max said again. “Just because stupid *Neil's* home – “

“Look, you can still go to the goddamn movie later,” Bill told her. “She just said you gotta – ”

“No. I don't want to.”

Billy stared at her; Will and Lucas had gone quiet, too, looking between the pair of them. “Man, you really wanna start shit with me right now?”

“I don't know, are you really going to make me go?”

“What the hell you want me to do?” Bill asked her.

“God. *Whatever.*” Max slammed her tin of cheese fries onto the coffee table with as much force as she could muster and stalked over to the

corner of the living room. She grabbed at her ripped-up backpack in a dramatic way. “You suck, you didn't even stick up for me!”

“Shit, Max, the hell you want me to do?” Bill asked her again. “You don't frickin' live here, I can't just – ”

“No *shit!* Thanks, I know that!”

Billy raised his eyebrows up really high; now he looked kinda scary too. “Man, you just fuckin' got back yesterday, act like you don't even wanna see your goddamn mother – ”

“Oh, shut up, like *you* care!” Max snapped. She slung her bookbag roughly across one thin shoulder. Steve wondered if he should say something – really, Bill had been watchin' Max all summer so far. “You don't care about me *or* Mom! You don't even know what he's *like* when you're not around, it's not fair!”

Bill just stared at her. His face looked oddly open for a moment, like a little kid's. “What are you talkin' about?”

“Nothing. Forget it.” She was stalking towards the door. “I'll just go, you can have fun with the guys *without me*, AS USUAL!”

“Man, don't do this fuckin' baby shit to me,” Bill told her. He took a step away from the counter like he was making to follow her. “What you talking about, what's he like?”

“He's just – *an asshole!*”

“He say something to you?”

Max's face was bright red now and she was scowling even more with everyone looking at her. “*No.*”

“Max.”

“Whatever, I'm *going*, okay? You should be happy!”

“Jesus *Christ*,” Billy snarled. “You don't gotta be a fucking bitch to me about it.”

She just hunched her shoulders didn't answer him. Bev got up too and Lucas half-stood and then sat back down in an awkward motion. "Uh, do you want me to walk you home?"

Max glared at him too. "Gee, I don't think that's really a good idea, do *you*?"

"Okay, okay." Lucas held his hands up in fear. "I was just asking – "

"*Whatever*. I don't want you to get in *trouble* again."

"Yeah, that's not even – "

"I'll – I can walk you halfway," Beverly piped up quietly. "I gotta go to work at seven anyway."

"Fine." She waited sullenly for Bev to join her at the door before wrenching it open; really she nearly cracked Bev in the face with it.

Bev crinkled up her nose and made a great face which Max ignored. "Later, *asshole*," she seethed at Billy, twisting her hand around the doorknob. "BYE, STEVE!"

"Uh, hey, Max, you don't need to – " Steve started; Max stomped on out of the apartment and slammed the door behind her, not quietly. Beside him, Dust flinched at the sound of it.

Damn. Steve rubbed at the back of his neck. Well, he guessed he hadn't really known what he'd wanted to say to her anyway. "All right, cool."

Everyone was silent for a long moment. Billy rubbed at his face and pushed himself off the counter again. "Fucking *bitch*." He stalked over to the fridge and started slamming shit around in it.

The kids stared some more as Bill crossed the room with his bottle of water and collapsed down next to Steve – he very nearly knocked Dustin off the couch.

Mike rose up slowly from his spot on the floor close to the coffee table. He pushed himself to his feet and sat down beside Lucas and Will on the smaller couch, eyeing Billy warily the whole time, as if he

was a bomb about to explode (Steve knew the feeling). “Uh, is she going to be okay?”

“Sure.”

Mike eyed him some more. “Really?”

“Be fuckin' fine if she just goes home and eats fuckin' dinner with her mom,” Bill snapped. Lucas said quietly, “She can handle herself;” Billy gave him a nasty look for some reason.

“Uh, do you want to watch the TV or something?” Dust asked him.

“I don't give a shit.” Billy crossed his arms like a little kid and slumped down in his seat.

The remaining Monster Squad all exchanged glances and finally Dust picked the remote up off the counter table and switched the cable on. The kids started blabbering away again after a few moments but Bill wasn't saying anything at all now; Steve could feel him being super ticked off from beside him. His blue eyes looked cold, and his jaw was clenched dangerously.

Steve leaned over and nudged Billy's shoulder with his own. “You all right?”

“No, I'm not fuckin' all right.”

Steve looked over at him; Billy only stared resolutely at the TV. That was about normal. His shoulder, pressed against Steve's arm, felt really tense. “Hey, man, don't worry, she's totally fine. She's just, you know, pissed off because she – “

“I ain't talking about this shit right now,” Bill told him. His jaw clenched even more.

“Yeah, well, I just – ”

“Said I'm not talking about this with you.”

Okay. Damn. “All right, I – whatever, that's fine.” Billy didn't answer him.

Well. Great. Now Steve still had a headache, and he just felt like shit in general, too. He wondered if he should, like, drag Billy off to his room and make him talk or something. He didn't foresee that going very well, though, definitely not from the look on Bill's face right now. He slumped down on the couch too and didn't say anything else either.

No one else seemed very bothered, aside from Lucas, who had fallen pretty silent too. "Do you wanna kick us out?" he asked Billy.

Billy stared at him and didn't speak for a long moment. "Guess not."

"She's still going to the movie, right?"

He didn't answer again; Steve felt some of the tension run out of his shoulder, though. "Yeah."

"She'll be okay for two hours."

"I know that," Bill said shortly.

"Okay." Lucas turned back to the TV, pressing his lips together. After another few seconds he leaned over and started talking quietly to Will; Mike and Dustin were already laughing too much at the rerun of *Saturday Night Live* that was playin' on the TV screen. Finally Lucas grinned too.

Bill shifted around on the couch beside Steve. After another moment he leaned over, knocking his arm against Steve's own. "Hey. Sorry," he said quietly.

"That's okay."

"Just pisses me off."

"What, uh, what did she mean about your dad, you don't know what he's –"

"I don't know," Bill said, interrupting him. "You know my fuckin' dad's a prick, right?"

"Yeah, but he wouldn't –"

"She just don't know when to shut her fuckin' mouth," Billy told him. "She's fine," he said like he was reassuring himself.

"Man, of course she's fine," Steve told him; Bill didn't look too heartened.

"Doesn't matter."

The Monster Squad inhaled all their food and decided to start playing cards – Dustin said he wanted to do poker so Bill reluctantly started dealin' them all in. He had this big wad of cash that he kept waving around and calling his babysitting money. He was making Will and Rebecca laugh too much. They played a few hands and Dust was already losing all his money. As usual, this seemed to cheer Billy up pretty quickly.

"How did you do that? This is so unfair, that's my whole allowance until August!" Dust wailed. Bill was making a display of himself cackling and sweeping a crumpled pile of dollars into his lap.

Lucas laughed at him. "That's your fault for going against him with your lousy two-pair."

"Okay, I thought he was bluffing!"

"Tough shit, I never fuckin' bluff," Bill boasted; the only time he was good at lying was when he played cards. He glanced over at Steve mischievously. "Buy ya dinner tomorrow." He made Steve laugh.

Dust looked heartbroken as Billy gathered up his allowance. "You probably rigged the deck," he said all sulky.

"Yeah? Say it again."

"Don't threaten me!"

The kids played another game that Bill sat out since there was no money involved; he stretched out and put a cigarette in his mouth, then took Steve's lighter. He didn't light it right away, just kept twirling the lighter around and flicking it.

"You look like a Camel ad," Will said; Billy made a silly face at him.

He finally lit his cig up.

Rebecca scrunched up her face and got up to open the living room window, then sat perched on the arm the opposite couch with the rest of the boys. She tapped her foot imperiously.

“You're lettin' all my AC out,” Bill told her.

She twisted her long braid over one shoulder; she didn't look too bothered. “My stepdad already thinks I started smoking because I'm over here too much, he said he'll tan my hide if I come home again smelling like an ashtray.”

“Jesus Christ, what a goddamn sweetheart.” Bill blew some smoke at her and she rolled her eyes – Billy looked delighted by her. “Maybe you shouldn't fucking be over here so much then,” he said, not that meanly.

“Uh, thank you, my lady goes where I go,” Dust said; Billy flipped him off. “Here, shuffle the deck, I wanna see how you do it.”

“Yeah, okay.” Bill took the cards from him and dealt out another hand.

They watched the kids play for a while. Steve didn't really think that he was acting any type of way, but Billy kept glancing over at him. He stretched out and threw an arm around the back of the couch, ghosting the tips of his fingers across Steve's shoulder. “What's up, you ticked off at me now?”

Steve felt a little surprised again. “Uh, no. I just don't feel too good,” he admitted.

Billy didn't answer for a second and just looked up at him. He kind of looked like Steve was being funny again; he had one eyebrow raised up. Steve wasn't being funny – he had a stomachache. “Yeah? Tryin' to get out of this weekend.”

“No, no I'm not. I'll be fine, I just need to sleep for like ten hours or something.”

“So go take a nap.”

Steve rubbed his face. He knew he wasn't being super entertaining and all, but he hadn't wanted to get kicked out. "What, you want me to go home?"

"No, dumbass, I don't want you to go home," Billy said like he was slow. "Go lay in my room or whatever."

He hesitated; all the guys were still here. "No, that's weird."

"Why's it weird? You sleep here all the time anyway."

"Uh, I dunno."

"You're ruinin' card night," Billy told him all exaggeratedly.

"No I'm not," Steve said again. He felt pretty cranky. His head really *did* hurt, though, and he did want to lay down. Bill's bed was so much better than his. "I'm fine."

"Oh, my god, just go fuckin' lay down, you want me to carry you?" Billy locked eyes with him and Steve folded. Bill probably really *would* try to carry him. He thought he was way too fucking funny.

"Okay, whatever. Uh, just for like an hour. We can still go to the movie."

"Oh, sure, I'm fuckin' *dyin'* to see Corey Feldman wave his prick all over the screen."

"Oh, my god, I bet you are," Dustin said happily; Billy flared his nostrils like a demon.

Steve waited until the next game was finished and got up and squeezed his way past all the kids. He went into Bill's bedroom and got his glasses, then went into the bathroom to take his contacts out. The light in here was too bright and the bulb flickered dangerously for a few seconds; it was probably getting ready to burn out.

He got his contacts out with minimal struggle and inspected his dumb, blurry face in the mirror. Even without his glasses on he could see dark circles above his cheekbones like bruises, and one of his eyes *was* red, as if he'd been rubbing it all day. Gross.

Oh well. Steve splashed some cold water on his face, two times, in the hopes of alleviating his headache (it didn't really work). He washed his face with the fancy soap he'd brought over the other week – Bill had teased him mercilessly about it for three days like a total asshole, then had just started using it too without even asking; he was the most annoying person on the planet. Steve put his glasses on and wandered back into Bill's room.

It was darker in here and a lot quieter, too. The ceiling fan was on, humming comfortingly. Steve had all but forgotten her, but Chewy was stretched out across half the bed, fuzzy little head propped up against one of the rumpled blanket. She flipped her tail twice as Steve collapsed down next to her, then pressed her face against his palm when he reached out to pet her. “Hey, hey. You hiding out, too?”

Something thumped loudly out in the living room; Chewy's little ears perked up. “BILLY, WHAT THE HELL, THAT'S NOT FAIR!” Dust roared.

“Stop *yelling!* Steve's *asleep!*” That was Rebecca.

Dustin yelped like a girl. “OW, BECKS, THAT WAS MY SHOULDER!”

“No shit, next time I'll aim for your nose!”

“HAHAHA!” Bill brayed out like a crazy person at Dust gettin' beat on. Jesus he was so dumb; Steve tried not to smile. Chewy flicked her tail against his arm.

He didn't fall asleep right away but it was nice to close his eyes or whatever. From in here, the kids weren't loud enough to be annoying, and Steve felt all right. He hoped he wasn't, like, ruining Bill's night or anything – nothing ever went the way he planned. He had like three sexy things he'd wanted to do and now he didn't know if he'd get to do them. He drifted away with the reassuring feeling of Chewy purring away beside him and to the sound of Dust screaming his head off over in the next room.

He opened his eyes a few minutes later; the door was open and a dim yellow square of light fell across the bed. Bill sat down next to him

and waved an orange bottle in his face. “Brought you pills, you take somethin' already?” He leaned across Steve and dug his other hand into Chewy's fluffy stomach like a claw; he cackled when she attacked his fist with her hind legs and bit at him. “You bitch!” he said happily, shaking her around.

Steve stretched his arm out and pushed the bottle away. “Thanks, I don't want your Percocets.” He'd had to take them before when he'd gotten his wisdom teeth pulled last winter and he didn't really like them. They made him way too loopy – maybe that was the point. He knew that sometimes people (people named Billy) just took them for fun.

Billy laughed at him. “It's Tylenol, you shit.”

“Oh. Really?” Steve sat up a little.

“Yeah, got this fancy shit at the hospital, s'like double strength.”

“Oh. Uh, okay. Thanks.”

“I dunno why you never take shit, you fuckin' hypocrite.”

“What're you talking about? No I'm not.” Steve tried to wrestle the bottle away from him.

“Yeah, okay. You remember when you poured that fucking cough syrup down my throat?”

Bill was so dramatic. “I didn't pour it, you drank like half the bottle,” Steve mumbled. “My dad never takes medicine, he says he doesn't need it.”

“Oh, sure.” Billy rattled the bottle at him again and then placed it down on the nightstand. He sat up too and pulled Steve's glasses off his face, then folded them up. “Great idea to be like your old man, right?”

“Mm. That's not what I meant, I'm just saying.”

Billy messed up his hair again; it was less annoying this time. He kept his hand on the back of Steve's neck for a couple seconds and just

looked at him. He had his nice Steve-smile on his face, half-endearing and half-amused. "Told ya not to eat the pie," he said again, teasing him.

Steve flopped down onto the pillow again; it felt cool against his cheek. "Leave me alone, go play your stupid card game."

"I am. Go to sleep, bitch."

"I am," Steve echoed him. Billy left, closing the door behind him, and Steve was enveloped in darkness again.

He took his Tylenol and closed his eyes. Bill had even left him a glass of water on the night-stand; beads of condensation dripped down the sides of the glass as Steve picked it up. Even though it wasn't too hot out, Billy had the AC on full blast in the bedroom like usual. Steve felt bad makin' Chewy move so that he could cover himself with a blanket.

He slept for a while, off and on. The worst of his headache went away pretty quickly and then he just felt sleepy. Every now and then the commotion from the living room would wake him up: the kids yelling or Billy laughing or both.

"Oh, my god, HOW DID YOU DO THAT?" Dustin yelled at one point. "MAX IS RIGHT, WHY DO YOU CHEAT?"

"HEHEHEHE HAHAHOO!" Billy said like a lunatic or a goblin. Something crashed loudly; Dustin and Will screamed and then Billy cackled again. "YAHTZEE, BITCH!"

"Oh, my god," Steve heard Mike say. "I think this is, like, the *gayest* you've ever been." Will started laughing.

"Yeah, I don't know about that."

"Fuck you!" The coffee table thudded and the kids screamed some more.

"WHAT? NO! THAT'S LIKE THE FOURTH TIME, THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!"

“He just sent you to the freakin' *Shadow Realm!*”

“PAY UP, ASSHOLE!”

Rebecca yelped as something clattered again. “Be careful, you SLUG!”

“YOU DIDN'T SAY WE WERE PLAYING FOR MONEY AGAIN!” Dust yelled.

“Dustin!”

“WHAT? HE'S CHEATING!”

“YO, SHUT THE FUCK UP, YOU TURDBOMB, STEVIE'S SLEEPIN'!” Bill roared back, equally as loud. Steve put his face back in the pillow.

He must have fallen asleep for longer than he'd realized; when he opened his eyes again the room was pitch-black and the living room was silent. He leaned over to plug Bill's lava-lamp into the wall and squinted down at his wristwatch. It was a quarter-past ten.

Oh. Crap. Steve sat up and looked around for a moment. The light from the lamp sent strange orange shapes glancing off the walls, soft monsters. He wondered if Bill had gone to the movies without him or something. That would suck but he could see it happening: maybe Billy hadn't wanted to wake him up, or maybe he had thought Steve would still be acting like a cranky asshole.

He had to take a piss so he stumbled off to the bathroom, then wandered into the living room. His head wasn't really pounding anymore, but there was still the faintest twinge of a headache dancing around his behind his eyes. Also, he wanted food now.

The kids *were* gone but Billy was sitting alone on the couch with one leg curled up under himself. He was reading a big thick book with a snarling cat's face on the cover; he looked up and smiled when he saw Steve, then leaned and turned the TV off. “Thought you were gonna sleep all night.”

“Sorry, I totally passed out.” He felt bad for thinking that Bill would have ditched him and left him all alone at his place. He needed to

stop being, like, insecure about shit or whatever. He knew that he thought about Billy a lot and wanted to be with him all the time. It should be okay to think that maybe Bill felt the same way sometimes.

“That's okay.” Billy shifted over on the couch to make room for him and Steve sat down and stared at him. “What you wanna do?”

“Uh, I dunno.” He felt not-quite awake and he *wasn't* sure what he wanted to do. After a moment he leaned in and kissed Billy hard. Bill responded enthusiastically, tangling his fingers in the back of Steve's hair for a second.

“You sleep okay?”

Steve didn't really want to stop kissing. “I think so. Where're the kids at?” he asked, then realized he sounded like a Den Dad or whatever, which was kind of the opposite of what he wanted right now (unless Billy was into it).

“Dropped 'em off at the theater, Henderson's mom's gonna pick 'em all up later.”

“Oh, okay. Did you get Max?”

“Yeah, she's cool.”

“She still giving you shit?”

“Eh.” Bill shrugged and then slung his arm around Steve. He ran a hand up and down his shoulder a few times, not too rough. It felt nice. “Doesn't matter, she'll get over it.” He didn't say anything for a moment or so. He kept on stroking down Steve's arm. “You feel any better?”

“I guess, a little.” He leaned over and kissed Billy again; Billy wrapped his arm a little tighter around him and opened his mouth. They necked for a few seconds and then Steve pulled away again. “I can't believe you planted one on me in front of Will earlier.”

“Huh?” Bill stared blankly and then rolled his eyes. “Yeah, he can deal with it.”

"I don't want to, uh, make him jealous."

Billy snorted. "Whatever. Think he's over me anyway, he *met somebody* at camp." He raised his eyes suggestively.

"What?" Steve said, surprised. "What, like a chick?"

"Nope."

Steve almost gasped. "Oh, my god, does he like some guy now?"

"I guess. They're writin' letters or some shit."

"Holy shit," Steve said; Will had *game*. He definitely could write a better letter than Steve could, anyway. "What, did they kiss or something?"

"I don't fuckin' know. Prolly looked at each other in the pool for two seconds or whatever."

He made Steve laugh. "Wow, uh, I guess that's good."

"No, it's not good," Bill told him severely. "He keeps askin' me shit now."

"Yeah, I thought that was what you wanted."

"That's not what I fucking wanted," Billy said; he looked real crabby. "I told him he could talk to me or whatever, I didn't actually mean that shit! What, you think I know somethin'?"

Steve laughed again; he couldn't help it. "Uh, I think you know a little."

"Askin' me how do you know if somebody likes you, I said, *what, you think Harrington likes me?*"

"Well, sometimes," Steve said; Bill looked even crabbier. "I'm *joking*. It's most of the time."

"Yeah, great," Billy said all grouchy. "I don't know shit about this kid he likes anyway, he's probably a fucking asshole."

Steve wondered if Bill was jealous or something – he had to try really hard not to smile. “Don't worry, I'm sure you're, like, way cuter than him.”

Billy looked at Steve like he was an insane person. “Of course I am.”

He *was* really cute; Steve leaned in and pressed their mouths together again. “Okay, more kissing now,” he commanded. Billy laughed so Steve kissed him again.

“Yeah? That what you wanna do?” he mumbled against Steve's mouth.

“Uh-huh,” Steve said articulately (whatever, he'd just woken up). Billy was grinning when he pulled back again for a second.

“Don't have to do anything if you don't feel good.”

“Thanks, I know that.” Bill put his free hand under Steve's chin so Steve kissed him again. Billy kind of tasted like french fries and Steve wasn't sure if that made him hungry or horny. He flicked his tongue into Bill's mouth to try and figure it out. It was the latter (he was pretty sure he was using that term right). “There's too many kids at your place,” he mumbled.

“I know. Sorry.”

They kissed some more and shifted around, trying to get comfortable on the couch. Everything was moving really slow, which was what Steve wanted, but it still felt kind of strange: even now, it seemed like every time he and Bill hooked up it felt like a whirlwind.

It was nice to not be in a hurry, though. He threaded a hand in Billy's hair and tried to focus on the feeling of his mouth, his tongue sliding against Steve's mouth. Really he guessed kissing was pretty gross, but it didn't *feel* gross when you were doing it with someone you liked or loved or whatever. He loved the way that Billy was kissing him right now, messy and kind of harried, like he couldn't get enough of Steve. Usually people had enough of Steve in about four seconds so it was really nice, overwhelming kinda.

Billy's hand had drifted down to Steve's shirt collar and he was

holding on pretty tight, but he wasn't pulling him or yanking him anywhere for once. Steve didn't mind that – usually he liked it, he guessed, or – at least, he knew that *Billy* liked it like that, but it was cool to not be pulled around for once. He covered Bill's hand with his own and kissed him some more; he almost forgot to breathe a couple times.

Billy pulled away for a second and started tugging on the sleeve of Steve's t-shirt. Steve thought that being shirtless was a good idea; it was a struggle to pull his shirt off and toss it onto the ground. Billy put his arm back around him and smoothed his other hand down Steve's chest. He kissed at the side of Steve's jaw and trailed his lips down Steve's neck, bit at his collarbone and then laughed when Steve hissed out too harshly as Billy scraped his teeth over one nipple.

“Maybe, uh, uh, don't start that right now,” he babbled out; he was learning that he definitely liked that way too much.

Billy breathed out a laugh against his chest and made his way back up Steve's neck, biting softly. “I'm not starting anything,” he mumbled. Steve put his hand back in Billy's hair and pulled him tighter against himself.

They kissed some more; Steve was grabbing him about everywhere, putting his hands up under Billy's stupid t-shirt that he still had on for some reason. Bill ran his hand down Steve's stomach and started unbuttoning his jeans. “Okay?”

God. “Uh-huh.” Steve tried not to groan and lifted his hips a little to help Billy slide his pants down around his thighs. He *did* groan a little when Bill touched him through his briefs, and again when Billy finally got his prick out and wrapped a hand around it. Billy smiled smugly against Steve's mouth which probably should be way more annoying. He tried not to yank Bill's hair too hard as he started moving his hand slowly up and down Steve's cock.

They moved around on the couch some more and Billy jerked him off for a while – well, it felt like a long time. It felt really good so Steve wasn't exactly paying much attention to how much time was passing. He slid a hand around the back of Billy's neck and tried to touch him through his jeans too. It felt so incredible just to touch him and get

touched back.

Billy kissed his jaw again and the hollow of his throat and trailed his lips down the center of Steve's chest; he spent a few seconds biting at a couple of the stupid freckles that he liked. He closed his eyes as Bill mouthed his way down Steve's stomach, leaving a trail of wet kisses. He had to try really hard not to buck up into Billy's mouth when his lips finally closed over the head of Steve's cock.

God. He ran his hand through Bill's hair a couple times. Now that Billy wasn't kissing him anymore, it was a struggle to keep control over himself. Everything that Bill did to him always felt really good. He felt too hot, like his blood was boiling over – he was probably getting all sweaty.

He tightened his hand in Billy's hair and tried not to moan again. He wanted to come already but he also really didn't want to come; it felt too good. Letting out a harsh breath, he tugged gently at Bill's hair. "I – uh, can, can you come back up here?"

"I guess," Billy mumbled reluctantly around Steve's cock. He slid his mouth off of him and sat back up. Steve kissed him again and then Billy pressed his forehead against his; he already had his hand wrapped around Steve's dick again. "What, you don't want me to do that?"

"Uh, I do, but I wanna kiss some more," Steve told him.

Billy laughed a little so Steve took his opportunity to kiss him again. "Man, you're so fucking corny."

"I thought you liked that."

"Guess I do." He tightened his grip on Steve's cock and Steve made an embarrassing sound.

Bill kept jerking him off and kissing him; Steve fumbled around and finally got Billy's jeans open too. After a moment Bill switched over to his other hand and started jacking Steve's cock from a slightly different angle. That *definitely* felt too good and it didn't take much time before he finally did come, gripping Billy's forearm hard as Bill

worked him. It felt like his whole body was seizing up, white-heat like shocks of electricity flowing out from the center of him.

After another moment it was too much – Billy laughed at him when Steve finally pushed his hand away. Steve was glad that he'd taken his shirt off; they always made such a mess. He pushed Billy up against the arm of the couch and climbed over him even though his pants were falling off and he probably looked like a moron.

Billy kissed him frantically as Steve fumbled around for his cock. He had like eighty things he wanted to do, but Billy came right away after only a minute or so, biting Steve's lip too hard as he arched up off the couch. That was awesome too (and awesome for Steve's ego), but Steve almost felt disappointed: sometimes it felt like Bill spent forever doing a bunch of great stuff to Steve, but then Steve never really got the chance to do stuff back. Maybe they could go again.

He sat up and shifted over a little bit, leaving Bill panting over on the side of the couch. He fixed his pants and then picked his t-shirt up from where he'd chucked it. He wiped his chest off with the crumpled-up shirt; it always felt really hot when he was coming, or when Bill was coming, but then everything was all cold and slimy like two seconds later. "You come too fast," he told Bill.

"Sorry." Billy didn't look too upset. Steve watched him put his prick back in his jeans and zip his pants up again. "You get me too hot, man." He added, "I don't jerk off every frickin' day like you do."

"Thanks, I don't do that," Steve lied; Billy grinned at him. "Do you want a new shirt?"

"Yeah, I guess." Bill took it off and tossed it at Steve, then picked his book up off the floor (Steve had no clue when he'd dropped it). He frowned and rifled through it for a moment. "Made me lose my page, Harrington," he said darkly; Steve tried really hard not to grin again.

"I'm sorry," he said solemnly.

"Guess it's okay."

He went back into Bill's room and got them new shirts. It was kinda

fun, picking which of Billy's t-shirts to wear. He especially liked the Parental Advisory one; it was really soft. After a couple seconds he decided to let Bill have that one.

Chewy had migrated out to the kitchen at some point and was making a bunch of noise violently killing a plastic bag now; Max had got her a bunch of cute toys which she usually ignored. The clock on the wall behind the sofa said it was past eleven now – apparently that was crazy cat hours.

Back on the couch Bill put his shirt on and then put his arm around Steve again. Steve leaned over and tucked his head against the space where Bill's shoulder met his chest; it felt nice. They just sat there for a couple minutes, not really talking. “You wanna go out?” Steve asked him. “We can still do something if you want.”

Billy wrinkled his nose up. “Man, I was at work all day, I don't wanna do shit.”

Steve huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, me either.”

“Shit, Steve. I ate so many fuckin' cheese fries, you might not wanna be here later,” Bill warned him; Steve laughed again. “What you do all day at work, you got any stories for me or whatever?”

Steve thought about it and let Bill rub his arm. He felt a little tired again now that they'd hooked up. Work had been pretty busy today, too busy, really. He'd only talked to Linda for about five whole minutes, so he didn't even have any good gossip. “Not really. Uh, my dad called me like right before I came over here.”

“Yeah? What'd he – “ Bill started; there was a loud crash from the kitchen as Chewy wrestled her bag under the kitchen table. One of the chairs scraped against the floor, making a loud sound. “YO!” He leaned dangerously up over Steve and glared over the back of the couch. “QUIT BANGIN' INTO SHIT!”

There was a terse silence from the kitchen; Billy settled back down and scowled. “Fuckin' sewer rat,” he said all grouchy like he hadn't been giggling and petting Chewy in his bed two hours ago. “Should throw her off the goddamn balcony.”

“Mm, I don't think you would.”

“You don't know what I'll do,” Billy said. “What were you sayin'?”

“Uh, my dad called me.”

“Oh yeah? He say sorry for Sunday?”

“I guess. I don't know.” Steve thought about that too. “He never really apologizes or whatever, I mean, not really.” Dad *had* said sorry, Steve guessed, but he hadn't really meant *sorry*; he'd meant *don't make a big deal*. “It's stupid.”

“It ain't stupid,” Bill told him. “Bet your moms was pissed. What's he think, he's gotta come home sometime, right?”

Steve didn't answer him for a few seconds. He felt strange again – almost guilty or something. He'd told Bill a lot about his parents, but he hadn't really told him everything. It felt like a lie or something; he didn't want to do that.

He ran a hand through his hair a couple times, then realized that it was the hand he'd just used to jerk Bill off and felt dumb. Oh well. That'd been at least five minutes ago, and anyway, Steve was pretty sure that he'd had come in his hair before. Actually, he definitely didn't want to think about that crap when he was about to say stuff about his dad.

Billy was staring at him; Steve realized he was just sitting there like a moron and not talking. “Yeah, not really. He – doesn't stay at home anymore.”

“Yeah? Too busy.”

“Uh, no,” Steve said. “Uh ... I ... “ He was saying *Uh* too much again; he couldn't help it. It was a hard habit to break. “Do you, I dunno if you remember, you know how I told you before that my dad had, like, a second office out near the one building?”

“Sure.”

“Well, it's, it's not really an office,” Steve admitted. “He's got an

apartment out there, he doesn't really live at home or anything. Anymore.”

Billy was quiet for a moment; he looked over at Steve and twisted his face up. “What, you serious?”

“Yeah, he – they don't – uh, I dunno. They're not, like, officially separated or anything, he just doesn't – stay at home. I guess it's easier for them that way.”

“I didn't know that.”

“Yeah, I didn't tell you,” Steve said. “It's kind of embarrassing or whatever. Sorry.”

“Shit, man. Why's your mom put up with that shit?” Billy asked him.

“I don't know.” He really *didn't* know; he'd thought it a lot. “She's – uh, comfortable, I guess. I don't really understand her. She yelled at me about it once.”

“Huh,” Bill said in a weird voice and then didn't say anything else. Maybe he thought that was stupid – Steve hated thinking that way about Billy, that he thought Steve was dumb or something. He was trying not to feel like that anymore.

It was *also* stupid to be feeling that way right after they'd had sex or whatever. Steve made himself say more stuff. “I guess she likes his money or something.”

“Yeah, don't blame her,” Billy mumbled. He shifted around again. “Hey, so if your dad's got his own place and shit, like, he's bangin' chicks or whatever, you think your mom ever – ”

“No no, uh, no, we don't talk about that,” Steve told him immediately; Billy laughed. “My parents have never actually had sex or anything, my mom doesn't do that. Did you know I'm like a miracle?”

Billy laughed again; Steve felt the vibration move down his chest. “Sure are,” he said easily. Neither of them spoke for a few moments and the room was really quiet (aside from Chewy and the plastic

bag). Billy was still running his hand over Steve's arm. "You know you can tell me about this shit if you want," he said finally.

"What, my mom's love-life?" Steve asked like a nerd. Lack of love-life, he hoped.

"No, asshole. 'Bout your family or whatever."

"Sure. I mean, I know."

"I ain't gonna make fun of you. That shit sucks, man."

"Uh, yeah, I – " Steve didn't know how to respond for a few seconds. He and Bill never really talked about things like this, and it still felt stupid. *You still have it so much worse.* "Not like it's anything new. And I, you know, I've still got my mom and all." Then he thought that was the wrong thing to say.

"Yeah. I know." They were quiet again.

Steve wriggled around and sat up a little; Billy's arm was still around him, though. "Hey, I'm sorry, I feel like I, uh, ruined your night or something."

"You didn't."

"No, I just mean – "

"We just hooked up," Billy told him, like Steve could have forgotten about that.

"Yeah, weird, I was there," Steve said; Bill smiled at him. "You coulda gone to the movies with the kids if you wanted."

Billy snorted and leaned over to retrieve his water bottle from the coffee table. "You kidding? What, you think I wanted to be a fifth wheel to those turdbombs?"

"What about, uh, Corey Feldman?"

"Man, shut the hell up," Billy said, laughing. "He's fuckin' fourteen, I'm good here."

“Yeah, I don't know,” Steve said anyway. He did feel bad, making Bill stay at home with him, like he was Bill's fifty-year-old husband or something. “I mean, you know, it's summer. You should, uh, go out and have fun.”

Billy moved too sharply and Steve felt him stiffen – he almost overturned his drink. He didn't speak for a long time, just holding his water bottle. Steve didn't know what he'd said. “Said I'm okay here,” Bill said finally.

“Okay.”

Billy cleared his throat and drank his water. He set it back down on the table and grabbed the remote, then stretched out some more so that Steve wasn't squashing him anymore. “Quit layin' on my stomach, I'm gonna puke on you,” Bill told him.

“Okay.” Steve shifted over a little.

“You want your food or something?”

“Mm.” He had been hungry, but now he was mostly too comfy. “Nah, I'm good.”

Bill settled his arm more securely around him. He burped romantically. “Can watch the TV if you want.”

“Yeah, thanks.” He put the television back on and lowered the volume. On the news, the weather report was showing a new cold front coming in over Hawkins and Two Forks.

Steve watched the TV and Bill went back to his book, holding it kind of awkwardly with one hand. After a moment, he said, “Hey, turn the page for me.”

“What? Really?” Steve asked; Bill gave him a look. “Okay, okay.” He turned the page, then again a moment later when Billy glanced up at him. “Jesus, do you really read that fast?”

“I guess.”

“You know, you're like really smart, man,” Steve told him, not for the

first time. "I mean, you could totally go to school too if you wanted."

Billy rolled his eyes and let his book thump against his knee. "Okay, yeah?"

"What?"

"Now I know you feel better, you gonna start bringin' up this fucking college shit with me."

Steve laughed. "I'm just saying."

"Look, just sit there and look pretty, turn the page for me," Bill commanded him.

"I'm not pretty," Steve reminded him.

Billy gave him a stupid grin. "Handsome."

Heh. Okay. "Shut up."

Billy stared at him intensely for a second; Steve wondered if he was blushing or something. "What?"

"You gonna turn the page or not?"

"Oh, right." Steve flipped the page for him. It was getting near the end of it; looked like he only had a couple chapters left. "So what's, uh, happenin' in the book?"

"Doctor's about to go dig up his dead kid."

Jesus. Steve tried not to make a face. "Okay, nevermind," he said; Billy laughed. They stayed up for a while.

On Thursday morning, Bill ditched Dustin at the park to stay in the

bed and make out with Steve for an extra twenty minutes, then it was Friday and they were finally ready to leave Hawkins and go on their trip.

Steve couldn't believe that so much of summer had already passed and he'd barely gotten to do anything – working sucked ass. Anyway, he was off on Friday, Monday too, and he had to admit to himself that he was pretty excited. He hadn't been camping or hiking in a couple years and he liked to be out in the woods: kind of on your own and finding your way, but not really on your own 'cause you'd brought snacks and a map. He liked being with Max and Bill, too, even moreso if neither of them were ticked off at him at the current time.

He guessed it would have been okay if Dustin or Will were coming along, or if Max had really brought Lucas like she'd been squawking about; Bill had told Steve that she'd decided not to invite him, though. But really there was something – good or special about just going with Billy and with Max. It felt ... Steve didn't know, he couldn't think up any SAT words to describe it. Important maybe. It just felt nice, having it be the three of them, instead of some big group or something. The rest of the kids could come another time if they wanted.

It'd be cool, too, to finally be out and doing somethin' with Bill, and to be able to act the way that he wanted to, and to talk the way he wanted to, and to just ... be around each other the way he wanted to be. Not that Max didn't act like a total dodo about them sometimes, but Steve guessed she was really the only person who he felt comfortable enough around to act the way he wanted to with Billy.

He didn't know why he felt that way – he wasn't ashamed or anything. He really wasn't. Dust was dumb about them sometimes, too, but none of the Monster Squad had ever said anything shitty to him about it; he was pretty sure they wouldn't *dare* to say anything to Billy about it. He shouldn't feel weird about them, or let himself feel weird. At least he didn't want to. It was another thing he had to work on, like saying *Uh* or biting his nails too much.

Bill had said he had to work really late on Thursday which was okay since Steve had to prepare for the trip – he was *Mr. Mom*, after all. He

stopped at the liquor store after work and got his secret supplies (booze and extra smokes for Billy; one of the check-out girls thought Steve was cute so she never checked his ID), and then went and got a haircut, too, since he was starting to look like a hippie again. Even though Bill teased him about being super preppy and all, Steve knew that he totally liked it: he was planning on being super seductive this weekend. Well, as seductive as you could be when you couldn't shower for two days.

Max still didn't really have any of the crap that she needed so Steve picked her up after her shift at the general store; they went out to Alex's dad's shop in Eastgate to go shopping. That meant that Alex got to go off-register for an hour and follow them around while they looked at tents and hiking packs and fancy stainless-steel water bottles with fancy clips on them. Alex even let Steve use his store discount; he said that next time he wanted to go with them too.

Friday morning Steve went back over to Bill's place and Max spent about twenty years cataloging all the stuff she'd got to Billy. Bill had gotten up late so he wasn't saying too much; about halfway through he got up and started making breakfast. Steve felt happy because Billy made the best breakfast (he was man enough to admit that, no matter what, okay he usually burned the eggs).

Finally Max scampered off to her room all excited to pack up her bag; Billy was clattering stuff around at the stove so Steve went over to the kitchen table and sat down. Bill was wearing his Parental Advisory t-shirt again.

"Are you excited?" Steve asked him. "We can probably get there around one or two, you think you can hike like four miles?"

"Yep." Bill was being pretty forceful with his scrambled eggs and Steve didn't know why. They'd had a good time the other night, and they were leaving town for the whole weekend. He'd thought Billy would be cracking jokes and be thrilled to be off from work with minimal kids around. Now he was wondering which of Bill's personalities he had in store for them today.

"Are you okay?"

"Sure am." Bill scraped the pan with his spatula a little roughly. "You have fun yesterday takin' my bitch sister around and buying her a buncha shit?"

Okay. Steve stared over at him; Billy was glaring down at his eggs like they held the key to the universe or something. "Yeah, I did, she needed stuff."

Clank! went the pan. "Guess so."

"Uh, okay," Steve said. He was starting to feel a little bit bad, like maybe he should have thought about it more. He'd always gotten Max stupid junk before: bought her food or paid for her movie tickets, and Billy had never really seemed to have a problem with it. All of her stuff *had* kind of cost a lot yesterday, though – she hadn't even had a backpack. "I didn't just get stuff for her, I needed to buy new shit too."

"Okay."

"What, are you pissed at me? It doesn't matter, she can use it all later, too."

"I know that."

"Uh, did you want me to get you something?"

Billy stared at him, for a long time. "No, I don't want you to get me somethin'," he said finally, all slow again like Steve was stupid. He looked back down at the stove, turned the burner off with a flick of his wrist and thunked the pan down on the counter right away. Steve watched Billy as he went over to the toaster to take the bread out that he'd put in earlier. He started buttering it like it wanted to murder it.

"Are you mad at me?" Steve asked him again. He hadn't answered before.

Bill glanced up finally; he looked a little surprised. "What? No, I ain't mad."

"I think your, uh, toast says otherwise."

“Oh.” Billy looked down at the crushed-up toast; he licked some butter off of his knife like a gross person. “Look, man, you don't need to buy us a bunch of crap to make us like ya, we already do.”

“I know that.” Steve played around with the frayed end of the tablecloth.

“Do you?” Billy asked him.

“That's, uh, that's not what I was doing.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” Steve said; Billy didn't say anything else.

Okay, again. Steve tried not to get annoyed – he didn't want to have another stupid fight about the dumbest crap imaginable. “Hey, if you have something to say, just say it. What, am I not, uh, allowed to buy stuff for Max? It doesn't matter.”

“It ain't about her, I don't care if you buy her shit.” Billy put his murder-toast in the pan with the eggs and closed the lid so that the food wouldn't get cold. “Look, Steve, I know you got a lotta money, guess it ain't something you think about.”

“Um ... that's ... “ He wasn't sure what to say again. “It's not my fault that I have money.”

Bill turned the other burner off and hissed when the bacon spit grease back at him. “You're always buying us shit, got me fuckin' groceries last week.”

“Well, yeah, 'cause I eat half your food.”

Billy ignored him; he picked up a piece of bacon and then winced as he burned his finger. “Yeah? How much money you spend out in Chicago?”

“Uh, I – ”

“You don't need to do that. You know I actually got a job and shit.”

Steve felt majorly stupid in two seconds, almost embarrassed or something. Maybe Bill felt like Steve thought he didn't know how to take care of himself or something – that wasn't true. Billy was like the most independent person he knew.

He was also a total weirdo: some people would like it if their boyfriends bought them shit. Steve wondered if he was going to have to make adjustments to the Good Boyfriend Steve handbook again. “I'm sorry, I don't have to do that stuff anymore if you don't want me to – ”

“That's not what I mean.”

“What, are you really mad? I didn't mean to – uh, I know you guys are fine and all, I was just trying to – ”

“Yeah, still not what I mean,” Bill told him. He looked up again. “I'm trying to say thanks, numbnuts.”

“Oh.” Steve felt kind of blank, then a little happy again. “Uh, that's okay.”

“I know you got Max a buncha fancy shit, she don't need that though. I just mean, uh, thanks. You don't have to do that.”

“I know.”

“That ain't why we like you.”

“Gee, uh, why do you like me?” Steve asked him.

Billy made a great face. “Well, I dunno about her,” he mumbled.

Steve laughed. “Maybe you can tell me later,” he said; Bill stared at him again.

Max burst back into the kitchen to destroy their moment. “BILLY! DO YOU HAVE SNEAKERS?”

“Quit asking me shit, it's too early.”

“Uh, I believe it's ELEVEN-THIRTY.” Max tapped her new compass-

watch all officiously. “Steve, aren't we on a deadline?”

“We can eat first,” Steve told her.

Max puffed her cheeks out impatiently. “Okay, I guess.” She sat down at the table and looked over at Billy, then rolled her eyes when he just gazed back at her. She got up again and stalked over to the cabinet to get a plate. “I bet you're going to get *Steve* a plate.”

Bill laughed. “Make me some fuckin' coffee.”

“Okay, in a second!” Max reached across him and pulled the lid off of one of the pans, then wrinkled up her nose. “What the hell did you do to the toast?”

They all sat around and ate breakfast; Max was talking about a mile a minute and Steve guessed that, no matter what had happened on Wednesday, she wasn't too pissed off at Billy anymore or whatever. He'd tried to ask her about it yesterday when they'd gone out to get their stuff, but she'd just shrugged like she hadn't known what he was talking about.

Max got up as they were eatin' and dragged her huge new backpack out onto the kitchen floor; she started stocking up on water bottles and checking the fridge for anything they could take. “Steve, can you pack the cooler?”

“Sure.”

“Jesus Christ, we ain't ready yet. Can you calm the hell down?” Billy asked her; Max ignored him.

“Kevin Costner said he can come over and feed Chewy tonight and Saturday, he works early on Sunday though,” she told Bill.

“Okay.” Billy had like three pieces of toast stuffed in his mouth.

“Uh, right – who now?” Steve asked; Max laughed and Billy somehow put even more food in his mouth.

“He's our neighbor downstairs, Billy says he looks like Kevin Costner in *Silverado*.”

That was so interesting, really. "When did you even see that?"

"What?" Bill mumbled innocently.

"What, I mean, is that, is that good?"

"I dunno." Now he was trying to cram a fourth piece of toast in his mouth; he was gonna choke and die.

It was so interesting. "Oh, my god, wait, do you think he's cute or something?" Steve asked him; Max looked delighted and Billy turned purple.

"No, I don't think he's fricking cute."

"Wow, I'm learning a lot of stuff about you today already," Steve said happily. He'd never seen Billy turn that color before. "Should I be jealous?"

Billy scowled; he looked like a gerbil or a hamster with his cheeks full of food. "He's fucking old." Steve didn't know if he meant Kevin Costner or the neighbor.

"Kevin Costner in A5 has *two dogs*," Max said in a stupid voice.

"Ohhh. Okay, him. I know who you're talkin' about." Steve would have to watch out for this guy. Whatever, he had two dogs too.

"Can we stop fucking talking about this?" Bill asked all grouchy.

Max was laughing at him. She took pity on him and changed the subject, though. "Dustin's going to come over on Sunday for Chewy, I said I didn't know what time we'd get back."

"He's gonna eat all our fucking food."

"We need to get more stuff anyway, our milk went bad yesterday," Max said; Steve made a face into his coffee. "Billy, do you need to pack anything?"

"Did it already."

Steve and Billy cleaned up their dishes and Max went and messed around in her room for forever again, then it was finally time to go. Max spent about five minutes kissing and squeezing Chewy and let her out on the balcony. "Do you think she'll come back if she knows we aren't home?"

"Jesus, she'll be fine."

"I'm just asking!"

They got their stuff loaded up in Steve's car. Billy had a big bookbag from back at home and he really did have actual sneakers. Max was wearing her crappy torn-up Keds and Steve foresaw a lot of bitching.

He started driving as Max and Billy fought over the radio. Max had her new George Michael CD which both the boys vetoed; Max argued that she didn't want to listen to the college radio for three hours. "We could just play the tape that you made Steve," she said sweetly.

"You really wanna start shit with me already?" Bill asked her.

"It's that or POWER 99." Billy made a face.

Once they got out of Hawkins the sky cleared up and it instantly got about ten degrees warmer; Steve guessed that was pretty weird but he wasn't going to complain about it. They took the Interstate for about an hour and then turned off down one of the country roads. Max pressed her face against the window in the backseat like a little kid and watched the trees whirl by; she yelped and made a big fuss when Billy leaned over Steve to push the button on the door so's her window would roll down on her.

"STEVE, MAKE HIM LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"Yeah, I can't make him do anything." He shoved Billy anyway so that he would sit back in his seat. "Jesus, at least put your frickin' seatbelt on." You'd think he would know better.

"Fine." Billy messed around with the radio some more and got The Animals playing on the oldies station; he kicked his sneakers up onto the dashboard and put his sunglasses on.

There were two ways to get to the lake from Route 31 – one was a lot faster, but Steve took the longer way through the woods and the smaller towns; he guessed it was sort of scenic or whatever. It was still early enough and he liked driving. He guessed he liked driving Max and Billy around, too, even if they were already arguing a bunch.

Max watched out the window as the stores and houses gave away to more hills and trees as they got deeper into the forest. Led Zeppelin was playin' on the radio, at least Steve was pretty sure that was who it was. "Last store's like ten miles up the road, you think we need more food?" he asked Max.

"Probably."

Bill had his window rolled down; he turned the radio up even more. The shadows from the trees cast strange shapes across his face. Steve watched as he combed his curly hair out of his eyes. "Pretty out here."

Max made a face. "Really? It looks like some *Deliverance* crap to me." Steve laughed and Billy rolled his eyes.

"Are you gonna fucking complain the whole time?"

"I'm just saying!" she yapped.

They stopped at the general store out in North Liberties and got some more snacks and an extra case of water, then Max spent forever rearranging the cooler and trying to close up the trunk again. "Do you think there will be a lot of people around?" she asked Steve as they got back into the car. "I brought *so much* weed."

Jesus H. "We're out in the middle of nowhere already," Steve told her anyway.

"Do you know where we're going?"

God, she really might complain the whole time. "Yes, I know where we're going," Steve said patiently. "I think, uh, we'll be pretty much on our own, most people just go out to where I wanna take us when it's like a holiday or something."

When they got to the camping ground they had to pull through a big lot and talk to the park ranger and get a ticket for Steve's car. It was probably dumb but he felt a little nervous and all since Max had just told him she had a shitload of contraband in her pack.

Max turned into a Chatty Cathy tellin' the park ranger that Billy was her older brother and gave him her mom's phone number: "In case we get eaten by bears and don't turn up on Sunday."

"Jesus Christ, you shoulda just gave him your social security number too," Bill said as they drove off to park the car.

"I've never been out here before! I don't know if Steve will get us lost!"

"We're not going to get lost." Steve was trying not to roll his eyes; he reminded himself again to have patience. He'd been out here all the time as a kid.

They spent a while getting all their things out of the car; Max had to re-roll her sleeping bag twice and make Steve reattach it to her pack. She and Bill fought about who was going to carry the cooler first so Steve took it. They walked off the main road; the sun was bright but it was a lot nicer in the shade.

Max had brought her Polaroid camera and she made Steve and Billy pose in front of the trail sign, then had Steve take a shot of her and Bill, too. She fanned her photos out imperiously and slid them into her backpack. "The last documented sighting," she said all ominous. Bill laughed and Max smiled over at him.

"You're such a jerk, I know where we're frickin' going," Steve told her.

Off onto the trail they went; after about five minutes they had to stop so that Max could make a big production of spraying down first herself and then Steve with bug spray. "You know I read that Lyme disease is a big thing out here, I *don't* need to get any ticks. Also mosquitoes love me, are there leeches in the lake?"

Steve decided not to answer about the leeches; Bill said that Max had

seen *Stand By Me* twice. "We can camp out away from the water, it won't be that bad."

Billy swatted Max as she came at him with the bug spray. "I never get bit."

"Yeah, your blood probably tastes like motor oil."

"What's your point?" Bill asked her. Max grinned at him again.

It was nice to be out in the woods. Nobody else was around, and you could hear the cicadas buzzing and the birds chirping, the rush of the wind through the trees. The trail wasn't too rough yet: you could see the big cliff that had the bikers' run on it, stretching up high above the pines. Max and Billy lagged behind on the path whisperin' their secret stuff.

"Okay, you guys need to keep up," Steve commanded them before he could stop himself. "I need you no more than fifteen paces away unless we're in an open area." He had five years of nerdy Cub Scouts info threatening to bubble out.

"Like the view from back here," Billy cracked; Steve rolled his eyes. They were going to be out in the woods all weekend so it wasn't exactly like any of them had dressed fancy or anything. Steve was wearing his old red basketball shorts and a white t-shirt, and Max and Bill were in their ratty cut-off jeans. Max was sweating to death already in her black Joy Division shirt.

She trotted on ahead of them and took the cooler back from Steve; she almost dropped it, looking around. "OH, can we go up that cliff?"

"Uh, we can go out there tomorrow if you want. There's another path out by the lake."

"Okay, so where *is* this lake, anyway?" Max asked; they'd been walking for over an hour now and her face was bright red from the sun. "Are you sure you know where we're going? What if we're, like, on the opposite end of the park or something?"

"Man, can you leave him alone for two seconds?"

"I am! I'm just asking!"

"I know where we're going, Max," Steve told her again (still patiently). "The trail's marked."

"Okay." She looked majorly doubtful. Jesus H.

They had to hike upwards for the last half-hour; that meant that Max started puffing away and talked a lot less which was nice. Even so, she kept turning around and snapping probably awful photos of them about every five minutes

Billy walked beside him as Max trudged up ahead; he already had his shirt off and Dustin's clunky old silver transistor radio slung over one shoulder. Steve had to admit, he guessed he liked the view, too.

"I can't believe Dustin let you borrow that thing."

Bill slid a glance over towards him. "Define *let*," he said innocently; Steve laughed. "What, he owes me."

"Yeah, I guess so. You doing okay?" Steve asked him; he had no idea how Billy wasn't getting eaten alive by the bugs. Steve was pretty sure he'd, like, sweated all of his bug spray off already.

"Yeah. Sure you know where you're going?"

"Oh, my god, we have a map," Steve said loudly. Billy grinned and Steve realized he was teasing him. "Whatever, hold the cooler."

Finally the path evened out and the dense thicket of underbrush turned scraggly; the dirt of the trail gave way to rocks and sand and you could see the lake up ahead through the break in the trees. Max flung her arms out and trotted ahead of them like a dramatic infant. "Thank God! Oh, it's pretty!" She dropped her backpack and raced off to the sandy shoreline.

"Told you," Steve told Bill.

"I didn't say nothing." Bill dropped his pack too and collapsed down against a fallen log. He was pretty sweaty but somehow not red at all; Steve was pretty sure that he himself looked like a lobster or a

tomato.

Max came racing back to open up the cooler and grab a bottle of water. "When can we go swimming?"

"We have to make camp first," Steve told her. Max made her goldfish face at him; she was smiling, too, though. It was past seven already – they'd gotten a later start than he'd wanted, and it had taken a while to get up the trail with Max goofing off every two seconds.

"How long do you think it will take Steve to set up our tents?" Max asked Bill all serious; they thought they were too hilarious.

They circled back into the woods a little bit and found a good spot uphill where the ground wasn't uneven but you could still see the lake. Bill helped him get the tents put up (it didn't take long), and then Steve went back and forth, looking for kindling and getting rocks set up for a fire-pit. Bill sat on the ground and watched him; he had his nice Steve-smile on his face again for some reason. "You want help?"

"Nope! I'm okay!" Steve said, going past him again. Making the fire-pit was the funnest part. Well, aside from swimming and eating he guessed.

"You look like my boss movin' shit around at the shop."

"Yeah, thanks."

Bill grinned at him. "Don't look exactly like him." He made Steve feel like a pin-up boy or something.

Steve finished getting the camp set up while Max went into her little tent (purple, not pink) and got her swimsuit on. The sun was starting to pull low in the sky so they decided to go swimming for a while before it got too dark; Bill just took his jeans off and stood in his boxers so Steve did too. He'd had been kind of scared that Max was gonna bring her bikini or something but she just had on a faded striped tank-suit. Sometimes Max looked like a real girl or something but sometimes she just looked like Max.

There weren't any other people around which was nice; Steve guessed

that most of the people who came out here made camp on the other side of the lake, where the shore was more dirt and sand and less rocky. Either way it was fine once you got into the water. Worster Lake was pretty huge and spanned most of the park, but they weren't near the boating area or anything. There was a little dock out here, not far from the shore. Max and Bill swam out ahead of him and insulted each other the whole way.

Steve pulled himself up onto the dock and watched Billy and Max splash each other; Bill got water up his nose after about five minutes and came to sit next to Steve in a big sulk. The dock creaked and tilted as Max clambered up it and thudded her way over to the opposite end to do a dive.

"Can drown her if you want, we can hook up," Bill told him.

"I can *hear* you," Max said all snotty; she did a cannonball off the side and then came up screaming. "SOMETHING TOUCHED MY FOOT!"

"Prolly a body."

"Oh my god, shut up!"

"Don't worry, I bet it was just an eel or something," Steve told her; Max made a truly amazing face.

"*WHAT?*" She made him laugh too much.

Max hoisted herself halfway up onto the dock and looked thoughtful. She slicked her hair away from her face. "I've only ever been to one other lake before. It's kinda nicer than at the beach."

"Sure, but you've swam in the ocean before and stuff, right?" Steve had never been to the ocean.

"You don't really swim in the ocean, well, unless you go past the breakers."

"Her moms wouldn't let her go out that far," Bill put in.

"Shut up!" Max splashed him ineffectively. "The bay's different, but I've never really been there either." Steve didn't know how she could

be from Cali and not have swam in the ocean. "Billy broke my boogie board two years ago."

"I didn't break it, it was already busted."

She puffed her cheeks out; Steve guessed she'd decided not to argue. After another second she jumped a little and then glared darkly down into the water. "Something keeps *touching me*. Do they have freshwater crabs out here?" she asked Steve; he'd been kind of hoping she'd get too tired to start up with her million question. "I guess those're in the river, too. They don't have, like, lobsters or anything, do they?"

"Uh, I think there's like crayfish, it's not the same thing, though."

Max made a face. "Did you ever eat a crab?" she asked him like a goon.

Billy laughed. "Think they got them at the country club."

"You're such a dick," Steve told him. "They're at the supermarket, too."

"I think a crab is just like a spider but in the water, do you ever think about it like that?" Max babbled on. "Just paying eight dollars a pound for a big water-spider."

Gross. He hadn't really thought about it that way. People were weird. "I guess so, I mean that's pretty gross."

"My dad took me crabbing once when I was a kid, I didn't eat any, though," Max informed him. "You can freeze them and they'll still be alive, my dad put a bunch in our fridge and one waved at Mom, she screamed for like ten minutes and threw it across the room." She made Billy laugh pretty hard and looked all pleased with herself. "She made my dad catch it under the table, he was pretty drunk so it took a while." She let go of the dock abruptly and dunked herself under the water; Steve guessed she was finished with her story.

She surfaced and made another face. "You guys need to put your swimsuits on, I can see like your whole dicks," she informed them; Steve was pretty sure he was the one who turned purple this time.

Max started swimming back off to shore. "I need to eat, can you make the fire?"

Billy sat back up and they watched her go. "Can ya see my whole dick?" he asked Steve.

Steve was pretty sure he was still purple; he took a moment to check Billy out. "Uh, yeah, kinda." Bill laughed again. "She's talking a lot."

"Yeah, she's having fun."

Steve was trying not to stare at Billy's dick in his stupid donut boxers. "Thanks for coming out here with me."

"Yeah, sure." Billy looked liked Steve was being funny again.

"Are you having fun?"

"Not really,"

Oh. "Well, I – " Steve said; Bill reached over and shoved him off the dock.

Steve came up sputtering. Billy was grinning at him. "Now I am."

It was nearly full-dark by the time they all reached the shore again and Max was being a little quieter. Steve guessed she was pretty tired out – hiking up a trail was a lot different than just walkin' around town or something, and they had gone pretty far. Billy immediately took his boxers off and started getting changed right out in front of the fire-pit; Max screamed bloody murder.

"Oh, my god, so don't fucking look at me," Billy said; he was pulling his baggy sweatpants on.

"Your tent is *right there!*"

Steve felt disappointed; he'd missed most of the show. He went into the tent like a normal human person to change out of his wet clothes. When he came back out, Max and Bill were still fussing with each

other. Steve got the fire going while Max sat and watched him intensely, holding the flashlight so that he could see. "I can't believe you actually know how to do that."

She looked all impressed by him and Steve wasn't sure if he should feel insulted or not. He poked at the kindling and handed her a stick for her marshmallows. "Yeah, I can actually do some things. You know, just like two or three things, but still." She smiled at him.

Max dug around in the cooler – she'd made them all sandwiches earlier. Steve collapsed into his fold-out chair and put his Newport Beach cap on. He felt pretty happy, he guessed. Bill looked disheartened by the hat which made Steve feel even happier.

"Okay, so what should we do? Do you want to – " Max put a flashlight up to her face like a geek – "tell *ghost stories*?"

Steve laughed at her. "Yeah, go ahead."

"Okay! Ooh! I have a good one!" She swung the flashlight around; Billy sighed loudly. "Ready? It was a dark and stormy night, and all the men were sitting around the campfire. Bob said, let's tell ghost stories! And Jim said, sure. And Bob said, it was a dark and stormy night, and all the men were sitting around the – "

"Oh my god, *no*," Billy said. He reached out and snatched the flashlight from her; Max laughed. "Quit bein' a retard."

"Okay, what do *you* have?"

"I dunno. You ain't allowed to come in my tent if you get scared," Bill warned her. He started telling a story that was obviously a rip-off of the first *Friday the 13th* movie; Max got all freaked out anyway and the boys laughed at her.

They all sat out and watched the fire for a while. Max propped her flashlight up atop a boulder that she'd gotten her canvas chair set up by and started writing in her journal.

"You fuckin' nerd, can't believe you brought that thing," Bill said; he was crashed out at Steve's feet trying to see how many jumbo marshmallows he could shove in his mouth (the answer was five, so

far).

Max glared at him and clicked her pen threateningly. "Shut up! Why don't you go read your stupid book!"

"Fuck you," Billy muttered and dribbled marshmallows down his chin; he was so sexy. "It's too dark out."

It was dark out – aside from the flickering light from the campfire, the darkness of the forest stretched out in all directions. Steve thought it was really peaceful or whatever, even though Bill's dumb story had gotten him a little creeped out too, not that he would ever say it. He watched the fire burn down to the embers and then Bill was standing up and putting a hand on his shoulder. "Yo, Sleeping Beauty, put the fire out."

"Huh? I wasn't asleep," Steve managed. He rubbed his face a little.

"You were slobbering like a coma patient."

"No, I wasn't." He checked his face for drool anyway. "Where's Max at?"

"Went to bed like a half hour ago."

Okay, maybe he had been asleep. "Oh."

Steve stamped out the fire as Bill went into their tent and rolled out the sleeping bags. They kissed for a while and argued over who would pass out first; Steve wasn't sure who won because he fell asleep again.

He woke up with Billy crashed out on top of him the next morning. That was nice but he was making Steve all sweaty. He laid there for a while and let Billy drool on him; he was trying to decide if he had a headache or if he just needed more water.

It was pretty early, only nine, but Max was up already. Steve let her start the fire up (it took a while, even with him tellin' her what to do) and showed her the instant coffee he'd brought. "Oh, my god, you're *amazing*," she said. Bill was crawling out of the tent with his hair sticking up and lines on his face from the sleeping bag; Max looked

over at him. "Billy, your boyfriend is the best!"

"I know that." Bill collapsed into Steve's chair. "What we gonna eat?"

They ate sausage for breakfast and had coffee with no milk; Max said she wanted to go up the biking trail to see the cliffs so Steve figured they should head out soon – it would probably get too hot later.

Billy got up and dusted his sweatpants off. "Okay, I gotta go find my thinking tree first." Max looked incredibly blank so he told her, "I have to go and take a *shit*, Max."

She recoiled and Billy cackled. "Oh my god! You're so disgusting!"

"Nature calls."

"I hope you get poison ivy on your ass!" Billy flipped her off.

"Don't get lost, stay by the trail," Steve warned him.

Max made a horrible face. "No, don't tell him to do that!"

"Oh, my god, bye."

Bill was gone for a while searching out his thinking tree. Steve drank more coffee and looked through his backpack as Max babbled on and on to him; he was almost sure he'd packed a deodorant. When Billy got back Max teased him for a while, then he slathered her shoulders in sunscreen and sent her off to splash in the water for a few minutes as the boys put out the fire.

"She should have waited a little longer, all her sunscreen's gonna wash off her," Steve said, watching as Max bounded into the lake.

"Yeah, good riddance. Want me to do your back?"

Steve rolled his eyes. He wasn't gonna let Bill get him started with Max twenty yards away and no walls between them. "I'm okay."

"Your loss."

"Do you want me to do *your* back?" Steve asked; Billy looked

delighted by him for some reason.

Max came blundering back with her hair all wet. She broke down their camping chairs while Bill went through the packs like he was taking inventory. "How many water bottles you bring?" he asked, rifling through Steve's backpack. "I got like six in mine."

Steve pulled his pack away from Billy. "Don't go through my bag, I brought secret stuff for later."

"Oh yeah? What stuff you got?"

"Uh, you'll see," Steve said; Bill looked kind of scared for a couple seconds, like he expected Steve to pull a huge dildo out of his bag, or – okay, well, Steve didn't actually know that much about crazy sex stuff. Handcuffs or a rubber mask or one of those weird feather things or something. "Oh, my god, I have alcohol."

"Really? Where's it at?" He picked the bag back up again.

Max rolled her eyes. "Billy! You can't drink at ten in the morning!"

"Why not? I'm on vacation." Bill cackled at the look on her face. "Oh, my fucking god, I'm not going to get hammered, be fucking hungover by four o'clock."

"That's nap-time anyway," Steve said; Billy grinned at him.

"You ready?"

"Sure, let's go." Steve put his dorky baseball cap on again.

They all shared a water bottle to brush their teeth and set off. It wasn't as hot out as it had been yesterday, but it was more humid and the air felt thicker; Bill took his shirt off again right away and Steve followed suit. It was totally stupid, but a couple months ago he probably would have hesitated to take his shirt off in front of Bill. He wasn't, like super insecure about the way he looked or anything, but Billy was *really* jacked and Steve, well, wasn't. Sometimes he thought he almost looked like he had muscles, but it was mostly because he was so skinny. He kinda looked like a human stringbean; Dust always joked that if Steve stood sideways, he'd disappear. Billy never seemed

to mind, though.

The winding path up to the cliffs was a couple miles uphill; about halfway through Max started moaning and wailing that her feet hurt so Steve piggybacked her the rest of the way. “Ugh, your chest is *really* hairy, I always forget,” Max commented as she clung to him. She was such a lovely person.

“Oh yeah? Do you think about my chest a lot?” Steve asked her; she wrapped her arms around his neck to choke him.

“I bet when you're older, you'll get hair all over your back!”

“God, I hope so,” Bill said fervently from behind them like a total weirdo.

No one talked too much for the last mile. The bikers' trail wound high up around the rest of the cliff and looped back around to the other side of the lake – it wasn't like a mountain or anything but it got pretty steep. Max decided that the first resting area was a good spot. She clambered off of Steve's back and he thanked God. He managed to trudge his way over to the rickety bench before he collapsed.

The bench shook as Bill sat down beside him. “You're super red right now, man.”

“Yeah, I think I got a sunburn already.” He should have let Billy put the sunscreen on him.

Billy dug around in his backpack. “Want a Fruit Roll-up?”

“Sure.” Max turned around and snapped a picture of Steve stuffing his face with her stupid camera.

Bill shifted over and sat flopped out on the ground with his neck cricked back against the bench. He handed Steve a bottle of water, too. “Jesus. I feel outta shape, my fuckin' legs hurt.”

“Yeah, we've gone pretty far. You feel okay?”

“Guess so. My arm feels screwed up.”

Oh. Steve felt really bad. "I didn't really think about that."

"Hurts like in my shoulder, it's 'cause it's too humid out. Bugs me when it rains too much, I'm like a fucking weather vane now."

Weather man Billy. Steve tried not to smile; it wasn't actually funny.

They stayed up on the cliff's edge for a while. They weren't too high up, but you could see pretty much the whole lake and the edge of the cabins on the far side of the park. Everything was green and hazy. Max bumbled around taking pictures of everything while Bill screamed at her not to go too close to the edge. "I shoulda brought a pack of smokes."

Oh, right. Steve dug around in his backpack. "Uh, you should tell me you love me again."

"What?" Billy looked up sharply; Steve tossed the pack of Camels into his lap. "Shit, man, you're the best."

Steve handed over his lighter. "You can start drinking when we get back."

"Just roll me over the side of the fucking cliff."

Max came skittering back over from where she'd been exploring with her camera. Both her knees were scraped up somehow – Steve reached up and picked a leaf out of her hair. "Oh. Thanks. It's really pretty out here, we should have taken El or something."

"Yeah right, I'm good with just you," Bill said; Max looked all smug (she snapped another picture of them).

"What, you really wouldn't wanna take her?" Steve asked him.

Billy lit up a cigarette and shrugged. "She's cool and all, I could barely fuckin' handle her in my apartment though. You think about the chief 'f we got her lost out here?"

"Oh, yeah." Steve didn't really want to imagine that. Anyway, she could just use her Bat Signal or something. He turned to Max. "How's she doin', anyway?"

“She's okay, I saw her on Tuesday when I came home!” Max told him. “I taught her how to shave her legs.”

Billy made a horrible face. “Jesus *Christ*.”

Once Max had decided that she'd gotten enough pictures, they rested for a while and set off on the long trek back. It was a lot easier to go downhill than up. Max said that Steve had probably carried her farther than Billy could so Bill made a big display of himself slingin' her over his shoulder. “Wanna fucking bet?”

Steve tried not to smile at Billy's back – he was way too competitive. He was always complaining about how Max tried to work him over all the time. It was pretty obvious that was what she was doing right now, but Steve wasn't going to spoil her fun. Billy did manage to carry her all the way back to their tents which was pretty impressive.

It was past six by the time they got back to the campsite; they all ate more crappy camping food (Steve was already daydreaming about Dairy Queen) and decided to go swimming again. Bill had packed the red bathing suit from last weekend and Steve was in trouble.

Steve's legs hurt and his arms hurt too from carryin' Max around earlier; he flopped out like a dead fish on the dock once he'd finally reached it. Max and Bill did as many stupid dives off the side as they could think of, then Billy climbed on top of Steve and planted one on him.

The setting sun had dried him off and Bill felt slimy. “Get off of me, you're too cold.” He threw his arm around Bill's neck anyway. Billy kissed him again; his body felt heavy atop of Steve's. For a moment, Steve wondered what they would look like to somebody passing by. Then Billy licked his neck (not in a sexy way) and Steve stopped thinking about that. “Ack! Go away!”

Billy cackled and stretched up over him; he was dripping water down Steve's neck. “Jesus Christ, you are so fuckin' sunburnt.” He stared at Steve in an intense way. “Hey, can I peel your back when we get home?”

“No way.”

“Come on, I love shit like that, I'll pop your zits for ya too.”

Jesus. Steve squinted up at him. “That's disgusting.”

“No it ain't, you should feel lucky.” Steve didn't know about all that. Billy flopped back down on top of him. “*Please* lemme peel your back.”

“You're so fucking weird.”

Bill grinned like a demon. “It'll feel good, I can put lotion on ya.”

“God, shut up!” Max wailed from the water. Steve and Billy laid around and kissed while Max splashed around; once the sun set they headed back to shore.

Back at the campsite Steve cooked hot dogs as Max made a mess out of everything tryin' to rig her camera up. She said she'd seen a raccoon early this morning and was convinced it would come back in the night. Bill fucked with the radio until he got the oldies station blasting all full of static on the highest setting. Cat Stevens was crooning out 'The First Cut is the Deepest.'

“Hahaha.” Bill set the radio down on the ground in triumph. The static fuzzed out over the open space between the campfire and the forest.

They listened to the radio for a while as the food cooked; Max was shoveling like twelve hot dogs into her mouth. “God, I'm so tired, I can't wait to get back home.”

“You're not having a good time?” Steve asked her.

“Oh! No, I didn't mean that!” Her little eyebrows piqued up. “It's totally great, this is way better than back in California.” She told Steve, “I never really went anywhere like this before, I'd just stay out in the backyard with Billy. That was fun too, though.”

“Yeah, your mom was telling me last week.” He looked over at Bill, crashed out with his legs way too close to the fire. He was drinking his whiskey and had been pretty mellow for the last hour.

“Billy made a fire once too, it took him like way longer than you did.”

“Suck my ass,” Bill told her.

“You didn't tell me you stayed out there with her,” Steve said; Billy shrugged.

“We camped out like six times!”

“Yeah, I just felt sorry for you,” Billy told her; Max threw some sand at him and he cackled.

Steve took over the radio when it started to get too static-y. “What do you guys want to do?”

“Too tired,” Bill moaned from the ground. “Where's your dope at?” he asked Max.

“Oh! God, it probably got all crushed up.” She dashed off to her tent again.

Max got up to take her bag of weed out; she had a fancy glass pipe in her backpack that she spent a while showing off to Steve and to Bill. “They just sell them on the boardwalk!”

“Dude, your mom will kill you if she catches you with that,” Steve told her.

“It doesn't matter, I'll keep it at Billy's.”

“Yeah, that's great,” Billy grunted. He packed the bowl and handed it off to Max. “Your weed, you get first hit.”

Max puffed her pipe (Billy had to show her how to hold her thumb over the little hole on the side – “I knew that!” Max said) and impressively managed not to cough that much. Steve waved her away when she went to pass it to him. “Thanks, I'm good.”

She made a little face. “Really? Okay.” She started to hand it over to Bill.

"I don't gotta smoke if you don't want me to," Bill told him.

"Really? I'm just going to do it by myself? Why'd you tell me to take it out?" Max made her goldfish face.

"I don't know, why'd you bring it?"

"It doesn't matter, you can do it if you want," Steve said. "I'll just get all stupid, I'll probably hallucinate or something."

"Just give him a shotgun hit," Max advised.

Steve felt really wary. "Uh, what the hell is that?" Bill and Max looked at him like he was totally dumb which he found to be a little unnecessary. "Okay, I'm not a dope fiend like you guys."

"Just get real close like you're going to kiss, Billy will blow the smoke into your mouth."

"Yeah, you think I can get up right now?" Bill said. It *did* seem like a lot of effort so Steve hoisted himself up out of his chair and sat down on the ground beside him. The ground tilted up for a second – maybe he'd already had too much whiskey.

Bill looked over at him skeptically. "Yeah, you wanna?"

"I'm okay, I just don't wanna get too fucked up."

"Okay. Fine, c'mere. Gimme your piece," Billy commanded Max; she and Steve watched him take a hit.

Billy leaned real close to him and Steve tried to breathe in; he opened his eyes and started laughing too much at Bill's dumb face when he got too close, though. Bill blew smoke out of his nose and coughed on him. "What?" Steve laughed some more. "Jesus, you're so stupid." He pushed his shoulder against Steve's until he knocked him over, then laid on top of him.

"Ow, oh my god, get off me." Steve managed to push him away after a few moments. "Okay, I can do one hit, I'm only doing one." Max stared at him the whole time and he had to try not to cough too much.

“There ya go.” Bill slung his arm around Steve's shoulder.

Steve and Billy shared the whiskey between them and Max and Billy traded their pipe back and forth. The night was quiet aside from the hum of the crickets and the fire snapping as it ate up its kindling – Steve felt pretty okay, even though there was a pointy rock digging into the back of his thigh. Bill kept rubbing his thumb against the back of Steve's neck which felt nice. His head felt a little buzzy or spinny or something; it wasn't that bad. He listened to Bill and Max trade stories for a while; he liked to hear them talkin'. Creedence Clearwater Revival came on the radio singing 'Who'll Stop the Rain' and Max and Billy argued over which the best album was.

“John Fogerty is so conceited, did you hear that interview where he said that his voice was an instrument?” Max was wrinkling her nose like she'd taken personal offense. Steve guessed John Fogerty was the singer or whatever. She looked up suddenly. “This is really fun, it's way better than back at home when we'd go out.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Bill said.

“That's not what I meant!”

The radio was playing the top forty from 1971; Bill said he knew a lot of songs because of his mom which Steve privately thought was pretty cute. At around 2am he stood up and brushed the dirt off the back of his jeans; Steve liked the way he looked in the flickering firelight. “Okay, I gotta check Stevie for ticks.”

Max was writin' in her little diary again. “Okay, you have to look for the really tiny ones, they're the ones that – “ she looked up and made a face. “Oh, you mean sex stuff, go away.” Bill laughed at her.

Steve wondered if they were going to do sexy stuff; he'd betrayed himself eating too much earlier and he felt super tired now. “Are you gonna stay out here longer?”

Max looked like he was totally dumb. “I have to find the raccoon!”

“Just stay by the fire, don't go wandering off, I fuckin' mean it,” Bill went off growling like a Den Dad.

“Okay, what if I have to pee?”

“Just go on the fire.”

“Yeah, don't do that,” Steve advised her.

Max waved him away. “Please don't be too loud.”

Steve crashed out on his sleeping bag with his flashlight and watched Billy zip up the sides of the tent and drink his water bottle. Bill raised his eyebrows up at Steve staring at him. “You wanna hook up with me or what?”

“Mm, I guess so.” Billy climbed on top of him and straddled him. Whee. “How bad do I smell right now?” Steve asked him.

Bill stuck his face in Steve's armpit and tried to lick him; Steve yelped (in a manly way, of course) and wriggled away. “Jesus, can you not be gross for like five minutes?”

“What, you asked me.” He leaned over and bit at Steve's neck so Steve put his arms around him. “Yeah, you smell pretty bad, man. Still look okay, though.”

“Thanks.” Steve didn't know about that; he was definitely getting a sunburn and his skin felt too tight. “Sorry I don't, you know, look like Kevin Costner or whatever.” Billy bit his neck again, this time not in a sexy way. “Ow!” It really hurt because of the sunburn.

“You're such a fuckin' prick to me.”

“No I'm not.” He was making Steve laugh; he tightened his arms around Billy again. “It's okay if you, uh, think he's cute or whatever.”

“I *don't*.” Bill was trying to squirm away now so Steve clutched him hard. Bill was such a baby – he could tease Steve all day and all night about something, but he couldn't deal when you gave it back to him.

“I thought you wanted to make out,” Steve told him. “Come on, I'm tired.”

“Whatever.” Bill still looked all surly, but Steve guessed he wasn't

gonna say no to hooking up. They kissed for a while and tried to be quiet since Max was only about ten feet away.

Steve threaded his hands through Billy's hair and gathered it up away from his neck. The flashlight wasn't too bright and he could still hear the radio playing outside; it was making him feel all romantic or whatever. "Hey, did you really use to go camping with Max out in your backyard?"

Billy made a little face; it looked great in the weak light. "Bet you think that's funny, huh?"

"No, I'm just asking."

"Wasn't no six times either," Bill told him. "Maybe like three or four. Used to take her outside when, uh ... " he chewed on his lip for a second. "You know, like when my dad would be drinkin' real bad or whatever."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"Why would you know that, I'm tellin' ya now," Bill said. "It doesn't matter. He never really – I mean, he's usually fine."

"Yeah, I don't think your dad is ever really *fine*."

"Used to get in like these real bad rages over his old job out at home, he'd go totally nuts," Billy told him. "She's just a kid or whatever, she don't need to see that. Her moms never let her do shit, I'd just take her out in the backyard with her stupid tent, sneak her a wine cooler. Guess she had fun."

Steve tucked some of Billy's hair behind his ear. He was pretty sure he had one of his big dumbo smiles on his face. "You know, you're kind of, like, uh, a sweetheart sometimes."

"Man, shut the fuck up." Billy screwed up his face in great offense. "You're turnin' me off."

"Okay, okay. I'm done, we can stop talking." He put his hands around the back of Billy's neck and pulled him forward; they kissed again, really slow, and then a second time.

Billy didn't exactly smell great either but Steve didn't mind. He got Bill's little bathing suit off of him and Billy stretched out above him with his knees planted on either side of Steve's hips. Steve couldn't stop running his hands over Billy's back and over his ass. It was his new favorite thing to play with; Billy's ass was amazing. Well, Steve had already known that.

"Don't fucking try any of your kinky shit with me, I ate like four power bars today," Bill warned him.

Jesus H. He was so great at setting the mood – Steve tried not to laugh again. "Oh, my god, I'm not." He'd totally failed at being seductive and had forgotten to pack any lube. They hadn't showered for like two days, anyway, and he definitely wasn't going to try anything like that with Max just a couple feet away.

It felt good to just kiss each other and touch each other, though. Steve's body felt tired in that really good way from being out all weekend; his arms around Billy's back seemed super heavy. His head still felt spin-y and he was a little dizzy from the pot and the alcohol, fuzzed-out like the radio playing.

Billy's hair was really soft from the lake and Steve couldn't stop touching it. He felt super romantic, or like he was in love or something, but it was probably just the booze talking. Bill reached down into Steve's shorts and pulled his cock out; Steve tried not to moan when they got their hips aligned. "Fuck," Billy mumbled against Steve's jaw. He started kissing Steve's neck, not too hard; it felt all tingly because of the sunburn. "Hahaha," he said when Steve grabbed his ass again. "Fuck."

"You feel really good," Steve told him.

"Uh-huh." Billy kissed his neck some more.

They moved against each other slowly and tried not to be too loud; they were getting all sweaty but it didn't matter. Steve *really* wished he'd brought the lube. He and Bill had kind of talked about it before, but he didn't really know what Billy wanted. Steve was cool with anything; he wanted to try everything. This was good too, though. His cock was so hard that it almost hurt, and Billy mumbled against

his neck again when Steve tried to get a hand between them.

“Shit, man, I'm too stoned. I'm gonna come,” Bill told him.

“That's okay.”

He pressed his forehead against Steve's neck, slick with sweat. “Fuck. I really love you.” Steve didn't know what to say; he was too dizzy. He pulled Billy against himself even tighter and tried to breathe. Bill shook a little as his orgasm overtook him which made Steve come too. They laid there for a long time, not speaking, but it didn't feel weird or anything. Steve kept on touching Billy's back and his hair, the little upraised scars on the side of his shoulderblade. He fell asleep listening to Bill's heartbeat with the flashlight shining on his face.

He woke up slowly from a weird dream that he couldn't quite remember, not a bad one. He laid there for a while, not moving and feeling sleepy. It always took Steve a couple minutes to wake up: Bill teased him that it was the only time he was quiet and Nancy had said once that he was like a zombie.

He could tell without opening his eyes that Billy was gone already; he guessed that was okay. Steve forced one eye open to check his wristwatch and saw that it was after ten. That was a little late but not too late – he didn't know what time they'd get back to Hawkins. He had off of work tomorrow too but he was pretty sure Billy had to go into the shop. For a while he just laid there, listening to the sounds of Max and Bill talking to each other outside the tent, the gravel crunching as one of them walked around.

He had a huge crick in his neck and he was pretty sure he'd slept on a tree root the whole night. One annoying bird somewhere outside was trilling too loudly, so eventually Steve forced himself to sit up. He spent a while rolling up their sleeping bags and putting their junk away. There was a suspicious stain on his t-shirt that was probably

jizz; he dug around in his backpack for his last change of clean clothes.

When he crawled out of the tent Max and Bill were sitting around in front of their makeshift firepit and eating the last of the food. Max was babbling on and on; Bill grunted back at her in response.

Steve hoped that things wouldn't be awkward or anything – he felt really bad about not saying *I love you* back last night. He felt majorly stupid. It was like he froze up or something; he didn't know what it was. “Hey.” Billy looked over and smiled at him though so Steve felt okay.

“Hey! We made coffee, it took Billy like an hour to start a fire,” Max said, twisting her head around to look at him.

Billy stopped smiling. “Man, leave me alone.”

“I'm just telling him!” She turned back to Steve and watched as he wandered over to them. Even his frickin' knees hurt – he felt like an old man. “The raccoon came back,” Max told him darkly; it'd eaten half a Poptart. Steve was pretty sure it had just been a squirrel or something but he didn't want to burst her bubble. “I heard you guys moaning for like two hours last night, you scared away all the wildlife!”

Steve collapsed down into his chair and scratched the side of his neck. He felt super gross. He ran a hand through his hair; it felt really greasy. That was gross too. “Thanks, no we didn't.” He was pretty sure there was no way in hell that he or Bill could ever last two hours. “Uh, coffee?” he tried.

“Got ya.” Bill handed over the thermos and sat down too, leaning back against Steve's legs. “What time you wanna go back?”

“Doesn't matter.” He had to force himself to say more stuff. “We could leave around noon, it won't take as long to get back to the car. Get back home by uh, six or seven.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

“What, uh, were you guys talking about?” Steve asked them. He tried

to drink his coffee without spilling it all over himself.

Bill had a hand around Steve's ankle. "Back at home." Steve hummed and reached over with his free hand to put his fingers in Billy's hair. Bill's hair was *not* greasy like his; that was so unfair. Max made a dopey face looking at them.

"What?" Bill said crossly. "Keep tellin' your story." Max launched back into her tale, complaining about eating sushi out at the mall; after a couple minutes Steve figured out she was talkin' about her dad's new girlfriend.

He sat and watched Bill and Max for a while and tried to wake up some more. The sky was grey now and it looked like it was getting set to rain. Max was just wearing her swimsuit again but Bill was dressed already: he had his torn-up jeans on and a black t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. He looked totally perfect like usual, and not like total crap, which was what Steve felt like. He drank his coffee until he felt like some semblance of a human person again.

It took them a while to pack up the campsite; everyone was moving super slow. Max said she wanted to go swimming a final time so Steve and Billy crashed out on the shore and watched her. Steve kind of had a headache again, but it wasn't really bad, not like a work-headache or anything.

He wasn't sure if he was excited to get back to Hawkins or not – he definitely wasn't looking forward to the hike back to the car. He could also use some electricity and a shower, but it still felt good to be out here with Bill and with Max (especially with Max a couple dozen yards away, fanning her arms out in the lake like a mermaid).

Bill was stretched out on his stomach, reading his book with the scary cat face on it. Steve rubbed Billy's back and played with his pretty curly hair for a while just because he could – he was pretty sure Billy was only letting him because he was distracted with his book.

Billy made a face and tossed it down when he finished it. "Stupid bullshit."

"Bad ending?"

“Yeah, I dunno.”

“What was it even about?” Steve asked; Bill spent a while tellin' him the plot of *Pet Sematary*. It sounded a lot better than some of the books that Bill had told him about reading for school before. Even so, Steve didn't think he had the attention span for that many pages. He wondered if maybe they'd make a movie someday or anything. “Well, maybe his wife won't be evil like the kid or anything.” The power of love was, you know. Powerful. Mm. He definitely needed more coffee.

Billy flopped over into his back and squinted up at Steve. “Think you could kill me if I died and came back all evil?”

“Uh, I dunno, you're already pretty evil,” Steve said; Billy grinned and made one of his demon faces. “Would you bring me back like in the book?”

“Yeah, sure. Wipe the worms off your face and all.”

Okay, Steve was definitely hungover. He tried not to gag. “Jesus.” Billy laughed. “Would you kill me again?”

“Probably just stare at ya and let ya eat me or stab me or whatever.”

“Wow, Bill, that's really sweet.” Steve tried not to feel touched.

“Now I need a new book,” Bill said all cranky; he was so cute or whatever.

After another twenty minutes it *did* start to rain a little and Max had had enough of the lake. She wandered a safe distance into the forest to get changed out of her wet swimsuit. They scanned the campsite one last time to make sure they hadn't left anything behind and set off again.

Everyone was pretty quiet on the trek back. Steve's back still hurt a little from where he'd fried in the sun yesterday; he hoped his huge nose wasn't going to peel or anything. Now that they were actually leaving he felt a little melancholy or something, even though he knew he'd be happy to sleep in an actual bed tonight (hopefully Bill's bed, but it would be okay if he wanted Steve to go home).

It started raining harder as they made their way out of the woods; Max said she guessed they'd picked a good time to go. She flung herself at the Beemer once they'd finally reached it and collapsed into the backseat, leaving Steve and Billy to pack up the trunk.

"Want me to drive back?" Bill asked him so Steve handed over the keys. "You can pass out if you want, think I remember the way back."

"Okay, I don't need to sleep all the time," Steve said; Bill gave him a look and didn't say anything.

He did manage to stay awake for most of the drive. POWER 99 played a block of Genesis which made him feel happy, and Billy even let him turn the radio up. Once they got back into town, Max popped up from the backseat all suddenly like in a horror movie (Steve was glad he wasn't driving) and started up complaining about how they needed to get food; Bill stopped off at the grocery store so that they could go shopping.

The lights in the supermarket were way too-bright and Steve was pretty sure they all looked totally terrible. "Don't buy too much crap, I only got like thirty bucks on me," Bill warned Max as she got her shopping cart. "Just get shit for tonight."

"Me and Steve can pay!"

Billy rolled his eyes. "Steve can't pay, he just took us out all frickin' weekend."

"Uh, okay, it wasn't like we were at the Marriott."

"Man, you are such a piece of work, I swear to God – "

It sounded like they were about to get into another argument; Steve leaned over to block Max from ramming into Billy full-force with her shopping cart. "It doesn't matter, you can get what you want," he told her. Bill huffed and rolled his eyes again, but acquiesced when Steve nudged at his shoulder with his own. "It's fine."

"Fine."

Max rolled off triumphantly with her cart and the boys trudged after

her. They found Joyce Byers in the frozen food section with her shopping basket; Billy cheered up immediately and trotted off to go and chat her up. Max rolled her eyes at Billy flirting over the frozen pizzas and dragged Steve off with her to the produce section. Honestly, if Steve didn't know better, he would almost think that Bill had, like, a *thing* for Mrs. Byers or something.

He'd told Max that she could get whatever she wanted, but she really did only get a few things, just enough for them to make dinner tonight. She decided that she wanted to make fried chicken; she had a recipe from Dustin's mom that she'd been waiting to try. "Will you help me when we get back?" she asked Steve.

Steve guessed he was hanging out with them some more. He definitely didn't mind that. "Sure." They spent a while picking out a vegetable, and Steve said he wanted mac and cheese too.

Bill wasn't by the ice cream anymore – finally they found him in the cereal aisle, carryin' Joyce's shopping basket for her like a little kid. "Hey, Max!" Mrs. Byers said brightly. "Hi Steve. How was the trip? You all look a little tired."

"It was totally cool! We went swimming, and I took a bunch of pictures!" Max told her. Luckily she did not pull the pictures out to show them off – Steve was pretty sure Mrs. Byers didn't need to see any photos of him and Billy kissing or whatever. Actually he thought he needed to get those away from Max as soon as possible.

"Where did you guys go again?"

They talked to Joyce for a while until she looked at her watch all surprised and said she had to go, then parted ways at the checkout line. "Bye Mrs. Byers," Billy said like syrup; Max rolled her eyes again.

"Why do you do that?" she asked him. "Steve is *right here*, and Joyce is old!"

Billy looked totally blank, just like whenever Steve accused him of flirting, too. "What are you talkin' about? She's a nice lady, I was having a goddamn conversation with her."

“She's not that old,” Steve added.

They drove back to Bill's apartment and got their stuff out of the car – it was torture going up the flight of stairs twice with the groceries (Steve glared at apartment A5 on the way in, both times). Max put the food onto the counter and started unpacking it while Billy made a beeline for Chewy, who was laying on the table and flipping her tail. “Hey, bitchy.” He laughed delightedly as she jumped up and swept back and forth across the table, pressing her head against his midsection and purring loudly; she nearly tumbled off onto the ground. “Hahahaha. You dumb asshole.” Max turned around and gave Steve a huge look that said that Bill was a total dodo; Steve couldn't help but smile back at her.

Max opened the fridge up and scowled. “God, Dustin ate my yogurt, too! Did he even water the plants?” She gasped, “My CD player!” and dashed off to her room.

Billy went off to shower and Max got Steve situated with her at the counter (she made him wash his hands as if she was his mother or something; he'd totally been about to do that anyway). Chewy wound herself around Max's ankles, meowing hopefully. It didn't take too long to cook everything, and Billy emerged conveniently from the bathroom as Max was dishing out their plates.

“Great timing, Billy,” she said dryly; she smacked his hand as he reached across her to pull a plate towards himself at the counter. “Can you *wait*?”

“I'm hungry, man,” Billy said. He took her fork, too, and started shoveling mac and cheese into his mouth. “This's good.”

“Steve made the the noodles.”

“S'good.”

“You have to use an extra cheese packet, I always get a second box,” Steve told him.

Billy put his head in his hands and smiled at him in this really indulgent way. “You're so smart, baby.” Max made a truly terrible

face at Billy calling Steve *baby*.

Bill made him feel all stupid inside. “Whatever, uh, I have to shower.”

“You don't want to eat first?” Max had taken her plate back from Bill and was heading over to collapse on the couch.

“Just save me some stuff, I'll feel way better when I'm not like covered in dirt.”

“Take some of my clothes if you want,” Bill told him.

“Okay, thanks.”

The bathroom was still all steamed up from Billy showering – Steve hoped that Bill had left him some hot water. He had drawn a stupid smiley face in the condensation on the mirror with bushy eyebrows and little fangs poking out of the mouth; Steve wondered if it was supposed to be Billy or something. He was kind of a big dork when he was happy – Steve liked him being that way.

He brushed his teeth and then showered for a long time, until the water ran cold (he apologized to Max in his head). He used Billy's soap two times. It had only been just a little over two days, but it felt great to be under some hot water and to not feel all sweaty and gross anymore. Steve wondered if Bill would mind if he used his razor, then decided that he felt too lazy to shave his face anyway.

Back out in the living room, Max looked like she was falling asleep with the remote on her lap; her red hair was frizzier than anything Steve'd ever seen.

Steve went over to the kitchen to find all the pots and pans soaking in the sink already. “Are you guys serious, did you eat everything already?”

Billy laughed at him. “I put your plate in the microwave, asshole.”

“Billy gave you the best chicken pieces,” Max told him.

“Oh. Thanks.” Steve got his plate and sat down next to Bill; Bill

grabbed him by the shirt collar and pulled him in and kissed him, two times.

“Jesus, can you guys stop for like *two minutes*?” Max wailed as if they'd been hookin' up in front of her all weekend or something. Steve had thought they'd been pretty good, considering.

Bill made one of his annoyed growling sounds. “Go to your fuckin' room if you don't like it.”

“I can't, my legs hurt too much,” Max moaned. Steve knew the feeling.

Steve ate his food and watched the TV; Max's chicken had turned out okay even if it was a little bit soggy. *Jaws* was playing on the movie channel and Steve felt pretty happy with Bill makin' his commentary about how stupid the shark looked. He felt kind of surprised, too – he'd been with Bill for something like fifty-some hours and he still didn't want to go. Weren't you supposed to get sick of each other or whatever.

After about twenty minutes Billy stood up and smacked Steve in the chest. “Yo, I'm layin' down.”

“Okay. Uh, do you want me to go home?”

Bill stared at him like he was dumb. “No, I don't want you to go home,” he said slowly, in what Steve felt was a very deliberate manner. Oh. Steve hoped that meant more sexy time.

He put his plate away and watched the TV with Max some more. He didn't want it to be super obvious or anything that he was a total horndog who was just waitin' to hook up with her brother. After about the fourth time that he'd checked his watch, Max turned her head and looked over at him.

“Oh my god, just go.” She was rolling her eyes.

“I'm so tired all of a sudden, Max, I can't even tell you,” Steve said.

Max rolled her eyes and made her goldfish face. “Shut up, you nerd.” Steve laughed. “I have to call my mom soon, *please* don't be too

loud.”

Steve couldn't make any promises so he didn't answer her. He hauled himself up off the couch.

Billy's bedroom was dark and the AC was on full blast; Bill was flopped out on the bed with no shirt and the cutest flannel pajama bottoms on that Steve had ever seen in his life. “Took ya long enough.”

“I thought you wanted to sleep.” Steve sat on the bed next to him.

“Nope.”

“Okay, so, uh, what do you wanna do?”

Billy grinned at him lazily. “Maybe you should come over here.”

Steve crawled on top of him and kissed him. He wondered why he had to do all the work. He put his face against Billy's neck for a second; he smelled really good. Well, Steve guessed he smelled the same – they'd used the same soap. “Did you have fun this weekend?”

“Uh-huh,” Bill said; he was a little chatterbox like always.

“Arm okay?”

“Yep.” Billy demonstrated how okay it was by grabbing Steve and flipping him over on the bed. Whee.

Steve felt really tired but he still wanted Billy; they kissed and touched each other for a while and got turned on. Steve loved the way that Billy's body looked: his stupid, stupid, amazing abs, his sharp hipbones, and his stupid, gorgeous, red cock. He loved the way that Bill's body *felt* against his, too, and he thought about it a lot. Their bodies didn't actually fit together like puzzle pieces – that was some corny crap people always said, right? – and Steve didn't actually think that Billy's body was made for his or anything, but sometimes, when they were pressed together just so, hips aligned in that way that made Steve totally crazy, it felt pretty close. He wrapped his arms around Billy and laced his fingers together against the small of Billy's back, pulling him as close as he could get him.

Bill kissed him harder and muttered against his mouth; the side of his cheek felt scratchy. Steve could feel how hard he was, even through his jeans and through Bill's pajamas. Billy was always hard for him, and Steve didn't quite understand why.

He worked a hand down Billy's pants and got them off; Bill groaned when Steve wrapped his hand around his cock for a moment. Steve decided that he didn't care even who Billy flirted with at the supermarket (well, unless it was Mr. Kevin Costner from A5, or, like Jonathan frickin' Byers or something) since he knew that he was the only person Bill wanted to do *this stuff* with.

Billy pulled Steve's shirt off and his pants off too, after a bit of difficulty with the zipper, and got him pushed up against the headboard of the bed. They were both totally naked and it felt different somehow this time, more intense. Bill licked a hot stripe down the center of Steve's chest and drew one nipple into his mouth, then the other, over and over again, dragging his teeth against the sensitive skin there until Steve was panting and clutching at Bill's shoulders too tight. "God, okay. That's really good."

Billy pulled back for a moment and grinned at him. "Shit, look at you, baby." He leaned forward and kissed Steve again, a little roughly. "You're too hot for me, man."

It was cold in the room but Steve's body felt too hot, like he was burning up again. Billy made him feel like a total lovesick dope or something. Before he could respond Bill had his mouth on him again; he kissed and bit his way down Steve's stomach and over his hips and drew the wet tip of Steve's dick into his mouth.

Steve moaned loudly (probably *too* loudly – he apologized to Max again in his head, then decided that, yeah, he really didn't want to be thinking about Max right now) and clutched Billy's hair too hard. It felt too good, and he didn't want to come this way, or so soon. Billy sucked him for a few seconds, working his mouth over the head over Steve's cock, agonizingly slow, then pulled away. He shifted back up and swung a leg over so that he was braced over Steve's hips. He drew his knees up a little, straddling Steve, and *holy shit*, okay, it felt so much better this way with no clothes on.

Bill was grinning at him again. "What you wanna do, you wanna kiss some more?" he asked; he was teasing him.

"Whatever you want." Steve rubbed his hands down Billy's back and over his amazing ass. God, Billy's thighs were incredible, too. He looked like a, a marble statue or a painting or something. Everything felt like it was spinning – Steve was so turned on that he felt like he was drunk again or something. The room felt too hot and too cold; they were both sweating too much and their bodies felt slick against each other's.

Steve knew what he wanted to do: he'd basically been thinking about it nonstop for about a week, or maybe even longer than that. He grabbed Billy's ass and pushed up against him, aligning their cocks together; Billy breathed out harshly and moved against him, pressing his lips against Steve's ear.

He tried not to go too fast – he didn't want Bill to freak out, but he also wanted Billy to be able to change his mind if, well, he freaked out or something. Billy didn't seem to be hesitating or having second thoughts, though, so Steve kept going – he was pretty sure that Bill had known exactly what he'd wanted to do, too, since the very second he'd climbed on top of Steve. He massaged Billy's ass for a while and stroked his fingers down the crack of it; Bill groaned loudly against his neck again.

"Okay?" Steve asked him.

"Yeah, keep going."

Okay. He could keep going. Steve told himself not to pass out or die. He was pretty sure he'd never been harder in his life, even last night when they'd been rutting together in the stupid tent. It was a little different than before – they had lube now; Steve fumbled for it in the drawer.

He felt pretty nervous – he'd definitely never done anything like this before, and he didn't know if it would feel good, if Billy would like it. He got his fingers slicked up and rubbed his hands down the small of Billy's back and then against his ass again in slow circles, feeling Bill's muscles clench and unclench as he pushed against Steve. He could

feel Billy's cock, too, pressed hard against his hip. "Do you like that?"

"Fuck. Quit asking me," Bill said all grumpy against Steve's neck.

"Okay, I'm just making sure."

"It's good."

It's good. Okay. It was good. He stroked two fingers down the cleft of Billy's ass. There were some soft hairs there which Steve found unbearably sexy for some reason; he spent a while just touching him. He circled one finger against Billy's hole, as slowly as he could manage. "Uhhhh," Billy said, squirming against him. "Hahahaha."

"Is that okay?"

"Just do it," Billy said. He made Steve laugh too much; he had to move his hand away for a moment. "Oh my *fucking* god, are you serious right now?"

"Sorry." He got himself under control and touched him some more. "You sound like a, a Nike ad."

"I fuckin' hate you so much," Bill said against his neck; Steve pressed against him again and Bill made a low sound, almost a grunt. "Fuck. God, come on."

"I am." Steve pushed one finger in him; Bill's whole body convulsed around him and they both groaned. "God, okay."

It was so much tighter than Steve had thought, almost painful, even though he definitely wasn't on the receiving end. It wasn't anything like fingering a girl, not that Steve ever really thought about *girls* when he was with Bill. He felt this insane panic for a moment as he pressed his way inside – he didn't want to hurt him or anything. Holy *fuck* he was actually inside Billy; he couldn't think for a few seconds.

The heat of him was incredible; Steve worked his finger in and out slowly, a couple times, trying to calm himself down and gauge Billy's reaction. "Is that okay?"

"Uhhhahahahaha," Billy said against his neck. Steve guessed that

meant yes. “Uhh, fuck. Shit.”

“Oh, please don’t,” Steve said inanely like a total nerd. Billy laughed out harshly and Steve felt it everywhere, against his chest and down his arm because, fuck, he was *inside* Billy, even if it was only a little bit. Jesus. Jesus. He was going to go totally nuts.

The whole room was spinning again; Steve kept fingering him as slowly as he could, pulling out and circling around Billy’s asshole again for a few seconds, then pressed back in when Billy pushed up against him. God he actually *wanted* it; he felt like he wanted it, so Steve tried to give him what he wanted. He pumped his hand against Bill a few times, feeling the heat of him. It was so different than what he’d thought – it was so much better, and he almost couldn’t believe that Bill was actually letting Steve do this to him.

Billy was working his hips against Steve and he was kind of grunting and he was making all these *sounds* which was really great; Steve wanted him to make more. Steve knew that he was a blabbermouth and he could never shut up, even during sex – *especially* during sex, maybe. Bill teased him a lot but that didn’t matter: he always needed to tell Billy how hot he was, or how good he made Steve feel. Maybe it had to do with having been with Nancy before, who had been so inexperienced, and always seemed so hesitant when they’d hook up – Steve always felt like he should tell her how good she was doing, or how much he wanted her.

Bill never said stuff like that, though, not really – not while they were actually *doing it* or whatever. Steve knew that Bill wanted him and all, but he’d always thought it’d be pretty fun to make Bill go totally crazy and babble out a bunch of stuff. Billy almost never seemed to lose control – maybe once or twice, a couple times when they’d first started screwing around, like that amazing time when he’d made Billy come in his pants. Steve always wanted to get him to that point again, even when they hooked up too fast and it didn’t go the way Steve wanted. He wanted to make Billy feel really good – the way that Billy made *him* feel. He wanted to hear it.

He was definitely hearing it now: Billy was panting against his neck and he was thrusting against Steve’s hip and he was muttering all kinds of stuff. He was saying things like *Oh Fuck* and *God* and *Steve*

and it was so good; Steve would do whatever Bill wanted him to do. It almost didn't feel like he was in his own body – if he was in his own body, he would have definitely come already, probably two or three times.

He kept on fingering Bill and pulling out and stroking him and pushing back in; he pressed up too sharply once and Billy hissed like Steve had hurt him and everything paused for a moment, then Bill was pushed down *hard* against him and he was coming, jerking his hips against Steve in these messy uncoordinated thrusts. As usual that made Steve come too and everything was *way too much* for a couple seconds; he pushed up against Billy's hips too and forgot about what he was doing with his hand.

Steve came for forever – it really felt like forever; sometimes his orgasms happened too fast because Billy was too hot and then Steve wanted to go again right away, but this time felt like forever. His whole body shook; it felt like he'd never stop shaking.

Finally it was over and Steve was left panting and dizzy. He let go of Bill and moved his hand away slowly.

Billy's body felt too heavy against his and Steve was feeling way too much – his heart felt too big, crammed up in his throat, making it hard to breathe. For a couple second he felt like – god, he didn't know. He felt like he was in love or something; he was pretty sure that was how it felt. He felt like he should say it; he felt like he was going to throw up. He was scared to say it – wasn't that what sex was about, anyway? A bunch of stupid hormones that made you feel like you were in love and turned you into a total idiot. It felt really real, though – it was almost scary. Terrifying, really.

The moment passed by, though, and Steve was left wondering what to say. Bill rolled off of him and pressed his face against Steve's neck – he was totally despondent for a couple seconds and Steve wondered if he'd actually passed out or something.

He shifted around with some difficulty and turned over onto his side too. He put a hand in Bill's hair (*not* the one that had just been in his ass) and combed it away from his face. “Was that okay?”

“Think so,” Billy said in a small voice. He was just staring at Steve with his blue, blue eyes, and Steve couldn't move. “Can I do that to you?”

“Yeah, sure, if you want.” Steve tried to roll over again and found that he couldn't. He felt totally strung-out and exhausted; his whole body felt like spaghetti, or like the noodles he'd just ate an hour ago. He put his arm around Bill instead. “Uh, maybe if I can ever frickin' move again.”

Billy laughed softly; Steve felt the breath huff out against his cheek. “Yeah, you can stay here for a while,” Bill told him. He sat up a little to pull the blanket over them, then slung an arm around Steve too. They kissed for forever and fell asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry, as usual, for the amount of time that it took me to get this chapter up. This part is pretty long, so I hope that makes up for it! Thank you to y'all who have been commenting. It's nice to know when people are still reading.

As well, thank you so much to the people who bid on me for Fandom Trumps Hate, and thanks to **Arthurian_maiden** who already gave me a really FANTASTIC prompt that I am excited to write! :) I am still going to try to finish this story before season three airs, but you can expect more Billy/Steve stuff coming from me soon.

15. Chapter Fifteen

Summary for the Chapter:

Harrington turned the TV on with the remote and started clicking through the channels. “Ooh, *nice!*” he said happily; there was a marathon of *The Golden Girls* on NBC until four-thirty. He stretched out on the couch and slung an arm around Billy's shoulder. “Hope you didn't want to go out today.”

Chapter Fifteen

The next week went by pretty fast; Billy spent most of it at work or with Harrington. It was the first full week of August and it was finally starting to feel like summer. That sucked since it was almost over actually – the days seemed longer than usual and the nights went by in a second.

On Friday Hank let him out at three-thirty since it was the weekend, was nice of him. Even so Billy didn't have shit to do. Well, he guessed it was more like he didn't *feel* like doing shit. It was gonna be Friday night; he was so interesting. He spent a while cleaning his place up once he'd gotten back to the apartment, then gathered up his laundry to take downstairs.

Harrington had left a bunch of his preppy polo shirts layin' around Billy's room. Practically every morning this week he'd made off with one of Billy's t-shirts underneath of his button-down getups for work; they were going to have a talk about that.

Billy did his laundry and tried to actually fold his shit up since half of it was Steve's instead of being a lazy fuck like usual. He guessed it was his good deed for the day – even now there was only one of them. Afterwards he laid around in the apartment, not really doin' too much, until Max came busting in right before six.

“Hi Billy!” She had a buncha brown paper bags from the general

store with her and her red work-vest on still; her frizzy hair was in a ponytail. She walked right on past him into the little kitchen. “*Why* do I have a key if you never lock your door?” she asked all imperious-like.

Billy lamented his life: it'd been so *quiet*. He didn't move from where he was sprawled out on the couch. It'd been real hot out today for once and he felt like a huge grease-ball from bein' at the shop all day. “You sound like a fucking mom,” he said; Max ignored him. “What you bring me?”

“Who says it's for you?” She was grinning as she shoved her bags up onto the kitchen counter. “Hey, can I stay here this weekend?”

He'd only seen Max a couple times this week: Monday morning, after their big camping trip with Steve, when they'd all eaten breakfast together and then gone their separate ways for work, then she'd called him all secretive like a girlfriend or something on Wednesday night. Neil hadn't let her go out to the mall with Henderson and Sinclair; apparently it was like some big thing.

Billy and Steve had managed to sneak her out for a movie with Steve's little chatty friend, though. They'd gone to see *The Lost Boys*; Maxine had said she *totally* didn't mind seeing it again. *Steve, you're really going to like Michael*, she'd yapped like a fucking idiot in front of Harrington's friend; Billy'd stepped on her foot, *hard*, and Steve had made his squinty face.

“Depends on what you brought me.”

“I'm serious!” Max made a face at him.

“I don't give a shit. 'f it's okay with your mom and my dad.”

“We just tell him I'm at Bev's house half the time when I'm over here anyway,” Max told him; Billy made a face at her. “Can I really stay here? I won't bug you!” she went on like that was possible. “I work all tomorrow anyway, I won't be around. The weekend is the *worst* when your dad's home. He never stops yelling at me now, I'm like the new you!”

That was great and all. Billy guessed he felt bad; he didn't know what to say to her. He was glad as hell that he wasn't stayin' at home anymore but that meant he couldn't do shit for Max when he wasn't around. Like he'd told her last week, it wasn't like she fucking lived with him or something.

He'd been thinking about it lately and all and maybe it wouldn't that bad if she did; he was already used to her. Back in Riverside there'd been this kid who'd stayed at some little motel with two of his younger sisters because their parents had been too fucked up or whatever. Max could stay with Billy if she really wanted to.

Not like her moms would ever go for that in a million years or whatever. But he'd been thinking and maybe Susan could come and stay with him too, like if she ever needed to or if she needed a place to stay or whatever. Sue could have his mattress – it wasn't that gross yet or anything; Billy could sleep on the couch. That would probably mean he'd have to stop screwin' around with Harrington all over the apartment but they still had Steve's place to hook up at. Billy could move his weights and his workout set into the living room, or into Max's little room here, if Sue wanted to make the bedroom nice or whatever.

It was just a bunch of dumb bullshit anyway, just something he'd been thinkin' about. It's not like he was really serious about it or whatever. Max and Susan weren't like his real family or anything even if Max was like his sister sometimes. Sue wouldn't want to go from havin' a whole house to staying in Billy's rat-hole apartment. Chicks needed their space, Billy was pretty sure.

It wasn't like Susan had ever really said anything to him about actually leavin' his old man anyway. Just seemed like she was way happier whenever he wasn't around. Billy didn't even know how to bring it up with her; it didn't matter.

“What's he been up to, bugging you or whatever?” he asked Max.

“He always bugs me. He's on vacation until the twelfth, this whole week has been *super fun*.”

Max tellin' him about his old man made Billy feel weird as fuck – it

usually did now. Sometimes she didn't want to talk about his dad at all; that made Billy feel weird as fuck too.

It wasn't like he thought his dad was a fucking pervert or a rapist or something. Well, he didn't know. He was pretty sure. He didn't think the kinda shit about his old man that his old man thought about *him* – the shit that his dad had always used to yell at Billy, about Billy. It was just that Maxine wasn't Neil's real kid or anything, and it wasn't like he'd adopted her when she was a little baby or whatever. He didn't need to act the way he did about her. What way that *was*, Billy still wasn't exactly sure. He just knew that it made him feel weird as *fuck*, and it seemed to get worse and worse as Max had been gettin' older.

If Neil felt any kinda way about Max he probably felt like she was his property or some shit. Apparently Billy had *territory* issues; maybe he'd got 'em from his dad. He could remember the way his old man had talked about her back in the springtime, right before Billy'd moved out or whatever, the way he'd talked about her even before that. He almost couldn't think about it – it made him feel real nervous or sick or something. His dad wouldn't really do anything, at least Billy was pretty sure.

Max kept on talkin'; Billy hoped he hadn't missed anything important. “You know he took my stupid door off the hinges last week? Like I'd be dumb enough to try to bring a guy around again, *especially* Lucas!”

Okay. Now she was making him feel even fucking weirder. Billy chewed on his lip. “He took your door?” he repeated slowly.

“Yeah, Mom made him put it back after like two days though.”

Billy just stared at her. “What'd you do when ya had to get changed or whatever?”

Max wrinkled her nose up at him; she looked like she thought Billy was totally stupid. “I'd just go get dressed in the bathroom.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“What do you *think*, you weirdo?” Max asked him. “I just run through

the house in my underwear all the time like you and Steve?"

"Man, fuck you," Billy said. They didn't even do that. Okay just one time because they hadn't known Max and Sinclair were gonna come in; Max laughed at him.

Anyway it was the weekend and Billy really didn't need to be thinking about horrible shit like Maxine's underthings. Apparently there was a ton of shit he didn't need to be thinkin' about; he was being totally dumb. It was the heat or whatever, he guessed.

Max was *still* going at him. "Well? You keep not answering me, can I stay here or not?"

"I already fucking said you could stay."

"Really? Okay, great!" She beamed at him all pleased (Billy glared at her so's she wouldn't think he was getting soft on her). "In that case, I *do* have stuff for you, we got more clearance crap at work!"

"Oh, gee, that's wonderful."

Max ignored him being sarcastic. She bounced over to him with a bunch of fucking candles in her arms and crashed down on his legs.

"Man, get the hell off me." Billy tried to kick her off of him; Max wiggled her butt on his ankles like a horror. "*Jesus Christ!*"

Max ignored him some more. "I got you a bunch of stuff, we need to make your apartment not smell like weed and gym socks all the time!"

"It doesn't fucking smell like – "

She shoved a candle in his face gleefully; it was pink. "Look, I got *Eternal Romance* for you and Steve!"

Jesus God. Billy tried to smack her hand away so she shoved the candle in his face even more. "Shut the fuck up." Max laughed her ass off at him again.

"It's a Yankee Candle, I got it for three bucks!" She set her candles

out on the coffee table – there were four – and bounded back over to the kitchen, tossing her work-vest onto the counter. She was wearing a striped t-shirt and her super shorty-shorts that went up to her belly-button; Billy lamented his life again. Didn't they have a fucking dress code at the general store. “Joyce made this shepherd's pie last night, she brought extra for me to take home! One piece is for you, I saved it!”

Truly Billy felt touched (well, once he'd finished feeling disgusted about the shorty-shorts). He was pretty sure if somebody gave him extra food, he'd eat it all to just be a dick, then tell Max about it later. Shepherd's pie was the best – there was *mashed potatoes* in it. “My mom used to make those.”

“Oh. Really?” Max said in a weird voice from over at the counter. She fidgeted around with her shopping bags. “Was she a good cook?”

Billy thought about it. “Guess so. I don't really remember.”

“How do you *not* remember?”

“I don't fucking know, it was like eight years ago,” he told her. “She ain't really cook anymore after she got sick.”

“Oh. Um...” Max just stood there in the kitchen looking at him. She was making a little face like she felt bad or some shit; it wasn't a big fucking deal. “I'm sorry.”

“Whatever.”

She frowned and stared at him for a moment longer. Billy didn't know why she was lookin' at him so much and it made him feel stupid. Maybe she thought he couldn't talk about his goddamn mom for six fucking seconds without getting all upset and punching a wall or whatever.

He looked over at her again. “Fucking what?”

“Nothing!” Max turned back to her bags finally and stopped scrutinizing him. She unpacked the rest of her crap and then started running around again like a giddy puppy or some shit. She bounded into her room and came back out, waving her stash of dope in Billy's

face. "Smoke since Steve's not here?"

Billy felt proud again for a moment. A year ago he'd have been the one hiding dope in his room; he sure as shit wouldn't have shared it with Maxine.

"Yeah, okay." It was Friday night but Harrington was working late anyway; he said he'd probably come over around eight or nine. Billy hoped that Max would fuck off or go to her room so that Steve could do more shit to him, like he had last night. Or Tuesday night. Pretty much every night aside from Wednesday when they'd gone out to the movies. Hehehe.

"*Ew*, Billy!" Maxine said, looking at his face. "Do you have to smile like that just because I said Steve's stupid name?"

"Fuck you, I'm not doing anything!" Billy forced himself to stop smiling. God she was such a bitch.

Max rolled the third-worst joint that Billy'd ever seen in his life and chatted her little head off to him as she lit up and then passed it to him; she didn't seem too traumatized or whatever from spendin' the week with Billy's old man so Billy figured it was okay. "When's Steve coming over here, are you guys going to go out with *Alex* again?" She laughed at the face Billy made. "Oh, my god, he's really nice!"

"That's debatable."

"Better than Dustin or *Mike*," Max pointed out; Billy guessed he couldn't really argue with her. "If Steve goes to State, you'll probably have to see Alex all the time anyway."

Jesus God. Billy didn't know why she wanted to make him feel all depressed. Max babbled on and on: "I can't believe you really wrote his essay for him, you didn't tell me you were going to do that! How come *Lucas* got to read it? I always miss everything!"

Jesus God, again. "He didn't fucking read it."

"What, he said it was good!" Max yapped. She was sitting sprawled out on the little couch across from him; she stretched out to balance her Keds on the coffee table. "Hey, can you help me with my summer

reading?”

“Right now?”

Max blew some smoke at him. “Obviously *not*.”

“What you gotta read?”

“Um, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.” Billy made a face. “What, you never had to read that?”

“Make your moms help you.”

“No way! She's, like, the *worst* speller!” Max told him. “It's that or more Shakespeare, I can't understand any of it.”

They smoked some more and then Max got up to mess around with the record player. She put *LA Woman* by The Doors on and skipped it to the third track. She said it was appropriate to listen to The Doors since they was getting stoned and all; Billy rolled his eyes.

Max whizzed around the kitchen, heating up their dinner from Joyce. She already had the fuckin' phone up to her ear, yapping away and giggling. “Hey, can Lucas come over later?”

“I guess.” Billy was lighting all the candles with his pack of matches. *Eternal Romance* did smell good; that one could go in his room. It was where the magic happened, usually. Haha. Okay he needed to stop.

Max danced around like a hooker to the Doors song that was playin' and went through all the crap she'd left on the counter. She went back and forth to her room a couple times, then spent a while putting up these stupid fuckin' gauzy curtains on the window in the living room; they didn't look like they was from the general store. Billy looked around at his bookshelf and his stupid plants and the curtains and all the candles on the table: it looked like a buncha lesbians lived in his apartment or some shit.

He still didn't yell at Max about the curtains though. They looked kinda nice actually.

“Hey, will you read these books? They were in the bargain bin so

Joyce just let me take them.” Max was shoving more shit in his face; it was two Hemingway books and a fuckin' Joyce Carol Oates novel.

“I guess,” Billy said anyway. “Quit buyin' me shit.”

“I didn't *buy* them, they were free,” Max told him all smart.

She gave Billy his food from the microwave. Joyce's shepherd's pie might be better than his mom's; Billy felt real sacrilegious for a moment. He burned his mouth eatin' too fast.

Max flopped down onto the couch across from him and pulled out her stupid journal out from one of the cushions. She glared at him all suspicious. “You guys haven't been reading my shit, have you?”

Billy grunted at her since he had food in his mouth. He had better shit to do than snoop through her little diary. He wondered what kinda corny crap Maxine wrote in there about Sinclair: probably some stupid bullshit like how his eyes looked like a chocolate bar or the bottom of a Hershey Kiss or some shit. Hahahaha.

“Hahahaha!” Billy said out loud, thinking about it; he kinda wanted candy now.

Max glared at him again. “Oh my god! Did you read it?”

“No, I didn't read your fucking love poems about Lucas,” Billy told her.

She made the worst face he'd ever seen in his life; her ears even went red. “Shut *up*! I don't even do that anymore!”

“Oh my fuckin' god, you asshole,” Billy said happily. He ducked when she threw one of the pillows from the couch at him.

Max wrote in her stupid diary and Billy ate his food and listened to the record player; he guessed he was pretty high. The Doors were singing 'LA Woman' now – it was gettin' to the break-down part in the song where the guitar got all quiet and Jim Morrison was singing his weirdo shit. Hahaha. Mr. Mojo risin'. It was so stupid; Billy wondered if it was supposed to mean something. Mr. Mojo, fucking dumb. It was so – *holy shit* it spelled *Jim Morrison*.

“HAHAHA!” Billy said again; he almost choked on his food. Max looked up and glared at him in disgust.

Billy felt offended really. He wished Harrington was here; he'd totally appreciate Billy's discovery. Well, probably after he said some stupid corny bullshit like *Wait, uh, who's Jim Morrison again?* Steve just tortured him on purpose; Billy was pretty sure.

He finished choking on his food and then cleaned up his and Max's dishes. He had a fucking dishwasher now so they didn't need to leave their shit laying around all the time. Max pointed out that Billy sounded like her mom when he said that though.

“How can I sound like your mom, she ain't got a dishwasher,” Billy told her; Max rolled her eyes at him.

Sinclair showed up a couple minutes later and he and Max did their cutesy bullshit in the kitchen for a while as Billy tried not to be too disgusted over on the couch again. The kids decided they wanted to go out to the arcade but Billy figured he'd wait around for Harrington. Max turned up her sweetheart act and weaseled five bucks offa him; Billy let her take it since she'd brought him dinner and bought him a buncha crap.

He went off to take a shower finally; Maxine promised she wouldn't come back in until eleven-thirty. Billy left the candles lit in case Harrington decided to come on in while he was showerin'.

Saturday he had class in the morning like usual. It was raining out again but not too bad; Harrington had gone off to play hockey with his geeky friends and left Billy his fancy car again.

He got lunch with Kasia after class and she told him about what he'd missed last week when he'd gone camping with Max and Harrington. They talked about her party some more – Steve had bitched him out for ten minutes last night for not tellin' him about it sooner.

Billy coulda sworn they'd talked about it before. He guessed his favorite thing to do with Steve wasn't exactly talking. *Jesus, you sure*

know how to make me feel great, Harrington had bitched his head off even more when Billy'd said that; he'd meant it to be a compliment. Anyway Steve had said they could go so Billy told Kasia they could go.

It was almost five by the time he got back to Hawkins. Harrington was already at the apartment and Max was around too again making a mess of everything. She was packin' a bag to stay over at the chief's house that night; was gonna be her and El's first sleepover or whatever. "Mike is *so jealous*," Max told them all overjoyed. "Can you guys give me a ride over before you go?"

"Sure, whatever."

"So what time's this thing happening anyway, what time do we have to head out?" Harrington was already making a big fuss combing his hair in the mirror by the door even though he'd just said he had to shower again and everything; Max was laughing at him.

"Steve, that's my brush!" she yapped from where she was crashed out on the floor. Steve ignored her.

"Think it starts at like ten," Billy told him.

"Uh, it **STARTS** at ten?" Steve squeaked out like a dork or a grandpa; his cute brown eyes bugged out for a second. "I mean, oh, okay, cool, that's not late or anything. What is this, like a, a sex party or something?"

Jesus God. Max made a great face and Billy tried not to grin at him. Sometimes Harrington acted like Billy was making fun of him when he was just being funny. "It's not a fucking sex party, you nerd." Kasia had even told him earlier that there weren't going to be any drugs at her party; Billy had lamented his life, but then cheered up a little when she'd said there would be a lot of booze, though.

"Okay, I don't know, I've never really hung out with a bunch of older people before. Are we supposed to bring somethin'? I dunno what your friends are like."

"I only know one person," Billy reminded him. "Think it starts

earlier, but she just told me to come after ten. She's gotta go pick her girlfriend up from work, she don't drive."

Steve made one of his cute faces in the mirror. "What, why doesn't her girlfriend drive?"

"I dunno. Chicks are weird."

"Huh, I guess so. Okay, that's better for me anyway, now I have more time to get ready. You can help me pick out a shirt!" Harrington told him; truly Billy tried not to feel overjoyed.

"Okay."

They got dinner at the diner and then Harrington made them stop by his house so that he could snatch some booze to take to the party. He said that they shouldn't show up empty-handed; Billy didn't think it was that big of a deal. Once they got back to the apartment, Billy sat on the couch with Max and watched for *forty minutes* as Harrington got his little outfit picked out.

Really Max was watching him; Billy was playin' the Nintendo. Steve had gotten three new games earlier this week for them to beat: *Castlevania*; *The Legend of Zelda* which had just come out; *Super Mario Brothers* for Henderson. "Hey, do you think I should bring a jacket?"

Maxine was paintin' her nails and she had her stupid look on her face like she was teasing Harrington; she was such a little bitch. She looked up from her nail polish. "Ummm. Try the striped shirt on again."

"Oh, okay." Harrington zipped back off to Billy's room.

Billy died in the game and put his controller down. "Man, quit making him fuckin' try shit on."

"What? At least Steve *cares* about what he looks like." Billy made a face at her. "It's cute!"

Steve came back into the living room wearing the awful bumble bee polo. He spread his arms out like a geek. "Yes?"

“No,” Max and Billy said right away.

“Oh, my god.” Steve went back on into the bedroom. After about ten more minutes he and Max settled on his third-most offensive polo shirt, then Steve graciously let Billy have the first shower even though it was Billy's fucking place.

Billy went and took his shower. Since he wanted to look nice for Kasia, he put on a t-shirt that didn't have a buncha holes in it. He laid around on his bed and started reading one of his new books while Steve spent eighty more years primpin' himself in the bathroom.

Harrington was too funny. He came back into the bedroom in his cute little underwear, toweling his hair off, and made a face at Billy staring at him. Chewy was laying around on the radiator in her usual spot; she stared at Steve too.

“Oh my god, you don't have to fucking look at me.” Harrington put his jeans on and then stole Billy's belt to wear.

“Coulda just got dressed in the bathroom.”

“No, I can't do that, I get all sweaty from the steam,” Harrington told him like a prima donna. Billy was pretty sure that he managed not to roll his eyes.

Out on the street a car alarm went off suddenly and they both looked up. Chewy meowed and jumped off the radiator, then sprinted rapidly across the room.

“Oh, what, is your ride here?” Steve asked her. He really cracked his shit up; Billy lamented his life again. Steve laughed even more, looking at Billy's face. “Come on, you didn't like that?”

Jesus God. “Don't even know why I put up with you.”

Steve put his little undershirt on and Billy watched the show. Steve was still pretty skinny; even so Billy liked the way the muscles on Harrington's back and across his shoulders looked when he moved or stretched out. “Okay, you could be a little nicer to me. You kinda ruined my plans for tonight, I rented *Alien* for you.”

“We don't have to go, it's not a big thing.”

“No, it's fine, we can go. It'll be fun, right, we never really went to a party together before. I don't think my mom's stupid thing counted.” He was fussin' with himself at the mirror by Billy's dresser; Billy slid off the bed and wandered over. “Stop, go away, my hair has to set,” Steve told him severely, still like a primadonna.

Billy wrapped an arm around his waist and tried not to laugh. “Don't have to leave for like an hour.”

Steve rolled his eyes in this agitated way. He was tryin' to push Billy off of him; it wasn't working. “Okay, some of us can't just roll off the garbage heap and be ready to go somewhere, can you not mess with my routine?”

He put his head on Steve's shoulder. He tried not to feel insulted by the garbage-heap comment; he'd just frickin' showered too. “I'm just takin' notes.”

“Right, okay.” Steve fidgeted around and played with Billy's hairbrush. He was being kind of funny or somethin' and Billy didn't know why. “So, uh, what kinda party is this?” he asked again. “Am I, you know, supposed to be with you or whatever or not, do I have to maintain, like, a respectful distance?”

Harrington had this way of talking that Billy was starting to key into – he never really changed the way he spoke or nothin', but sometimes he'd say stuff real casual when he meant it any way but that. He'd done it all the time when he and Billy had first started hangin' out, like when he'd talk about Nancy making him feel like crap, or the fuckin' monsters and all that crazy shit, or say something about his parents.

Right now it was making Billy feel weird as shit; he guessed it was just that kind of weekend. “I already told Kasia I was bringin' you.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You'll like her.”

“Okay, that's cool,” Steve said still in the super-casual voice. “I mean,

whatever you want to do.”

Billy wondered if Steve was finally gonna have his big gay panic right before the first party that Billy brought him to as his boyfriend or whatever. “Look, we don't have to fuckin' hold hands or whatever.”

Steve kinda laughed like Billy had made a joke or something. “That's not, uh – yeah, I don't care about that.”

“So what's your problem?”

“I don't have a problem,” Harrington said; he was still trying to shrug Billy off of himself. “Do you ever think, uh – like, I guess we look pretty weird together.”

Steve was making his squinty-face in the mirror and Billy felt again like he definitely should have told him about the party earlier. He felt pretty stupid. He looked at Steve and himself in the mirror; he thought they looked okay. Maybe Steve didn't want to be out to people or whatever. Billy got that but maybe they should talk that stuff before they went out somewhere and Billy made a fuckin' jackass out of himself. “Why, 'cause we're two guys?”

“Yeah, that's not what I meant.” Billy tried to move away so Steve grabbed at him. “Oh, my god, can you stop?”

“Thought you wanted me to get offa ya.”

“Okay, you baby.” Harrington struggled with him some more; he twisted around at the dresser and grabbed Billy's arm. “That's not even what I meant, I don't care about that or whatever.”

Billy felt like a sulky bitch. “So what? Too poor for ya.”

“Jesus Christ.” Steve hit him with his hairbrush; truly Billy felt abused. “You're not poor, you have your own freaking apartment, asshole.”

“I guess.”

“What, do you think I really think that?”

"I dunno. Look, we don't have to go," Billy told him again. He'd been looking forward to drinking but they could just do that here too. "We can just watch the movie."

"Oh, my god, I want to go." Harrington was rolling his eyes at him which wasn't very nice. He was still making the squinty-face too. "Look, I know you and Max have all your little jokes that I'm like a preppy nerd or whatever. I know she was teasin' me earlier about picking out the shirt, I was just being funny. I don't want to, uh, embarrass you or whatever."

Billy stared at him; Steve made no sense. Okay he was a preppy nerd but that was kind of the appeal or whatever, Billy guessed. He decided not to tell Harrington that Kasia already thought he was like a forty-year-old lawyer because of his car. "Yeah, I don't really think you could embarrass me."

"Uh, I don't know," Steve said. He looked like Billy was giving him a challenge; that meant tonight was gonna be so fun. "I mean, I could try pretty hard."

"I don't think you need to try that hard." Steve laughed and pushed him away again. "What, are we cool?"

"Sure, if you're cool. You're such a baby," Harrington said again like he hadn't just gotten all insecure on Billy.

"I think you should let me wear your wristwatch," Billy told him; Steve stared at him.

"What, really?"

"You took my belt," Billy pointed out.

"Okay, whatever. If that makes you happy."

Harrington handed over his watch; he picked up his hairbrush again so Billy laid back on his bed and let him do his routine. Steve got the third-most offensive polo shirt put on and then they went back out to the living room. Max was sprawled out on the couch and watching *Murder, She Wrote* so of course Harrington got all into it.

He and Max got into some big conversation about the episode and then Steve looked up at Billy. He looked really nice or whatever, even in the awful polo. "So are we pre-gaming or what, do you want me to drive over there?" It was only a little past eight.

Billy tried to think of that real good line Henderson had used on his girl forever ago; the kid was almost kinda smooth sometimes. "You can drink if you want. I'll drive us, I got precious cargo to transport."

Harrington got his Billy-is-amusing face on. "Uh, okay, you weirdo. I'll take us back home."

Steve drank three beers (Max tried one, then spent ten minutes gagging around the apartment and brushin' her teeth real dramatic-like) and then it was time to head out. Billy got into the driver's seat of Harrington's fancy Beamer and took them down Broad Street towards Lover's Lake. He dropped Max off at the chief's place and turned back up the street.

Steve was playing around with the radio; he'd got Prince singing 'U Got the Look' on POWER 99 and Billy was trying not to make a face. "Which way are you gonna take? Doesn't she live out near the city?"

"I gotta make a stop first."

"Oh, okay. Did you wanna get something else?" Steve asked him; Billy turned the radio up even though the song was killing him.

Steve flopped out in the passenger seat and played around with his seatbelt; he was such a lightweight. He made a face when Billy pulled the car down Dearborn, then turned left onto the winding road down Grant's Lane. "Yeah, you're just kinda doing a big circle."

"Uh-huh." Billy pulled up in front of the Byers' house and laid on the horn. He turned the key in the ignition and let the engine idle.

Steve sat up a little; he looked like he was in a horror movie. His pretty eyes were bugged out and he looked totally terrified. "Okay, what the hell are you doing?"

"Said I had to pick somebody up."

“Um, what?” Steve said; Billy honked the horn again. “Yeah, you didn't say that you had to pick somebody – oh, my god, Bill, are you serious?”

“What?” Billy said.

“Okay, yeah, this is another thing that you probably should have told me about – “

The front door of the house opened, spilling light across the dark lawn, then Will came tearing across the lawn towards Harrington's car like a little madman. Joyce was leaning out the doorway hollering something at him; Will ran even faster.

“Oh, my god,” Steve said faintly again. “Uh, okay, I don't know if that's better than what I expected.” Billy wondered if Harrington really thought that they'd been about to pick up *Jonathan Byers*; he felt sick for a moment. “So, what the hell are we – “

Wills opened up the rear-door and climbed into the car. He had his hair all slicked back and a button-down shirt on like he was goin' to the fall formal. “Hi Billy!” he said happily. “Hi Steve!”

“Hey kid, you ready?”

“Yep, I'm good!”

“Uh, okay,” Steve said again in his overwhelmed voice. “So, this is a thing that's happening. What, what exactly is happening?”

Joyce waved at them from the house and Will waved back all enthusiastically; they were too cute. Billy honked the horn at her. Steve stared all horrified and finally raised a hand. Billy told him, “Takin' the kid to the party with us.”

“Right, I got that,” Steve said blankly; Billy started the car up again and Steve twisted around in his seat. “Um, your mom is okay with this?”

“Nope!” Will said all cheerful. “She thinks we're going to a double-feature out in Lawrenceville.”

"*My Bloody Valentine's* playin'," Billy told Harrington. He adjusted the rearview mirror. "What's the other one?"

"*Halloween*. We get 3-D goggles."

"Ooookay," Harrington said all slow like he was havin' a breakdown. "Wait, so are we going to the movies?"

"No, we're going to the party," Billy said patiently. Stevie was so slow; was like he'd never snuck out before.

"Ooookay," Steve said again. "Uh, Bill, do you think it's really a good idea to take him to, like, a twenty-year-old's party?"

"She's actually twenty-four, had her birthday the other week."

"Yeah, that's really great, we could have picked out a gift," Steve told him. "Again, do you think that's a good idea?"

"She said I could bring whoever I want."

"Okay, but he's *fifteen*," Harrington pointed out; he was making Billy feel pretty dumb.

"Don't worry, I already told her about him," Billy said. He guessed he'd told Kasia about more shit than he'd realized. He didn't really have too many close friends but she hadn't made him feel weird about it. He'd told her about Max and then he'd told her about Will, too. He'd thought it would be cool to take the kid out but Harrington was makin' him feel kinda silly or whatever. "She said he could come."

"Don't worry, Steve! I'll be cool!" Wills piped up from the backseat.

"Thought it'd be cool to take him or whatever. He can hang out with me." It wouldn't make *Billy* look cool but he'd just thought it'd be nice for the kid to be around a buncha queers or whatever, see that it was okay. It definitely would have helped *Billy* when he'd been fifteen. That seemed like a lotta shit to say to Steve, though, especially with Wills in the car and all. "Since we got so much in common and all that shit."

Steve got him in like two seconds like he usually did though. “Oh. Yeah, no, okay, that's fine. Heads up would have been cool and all, but that's totally fine.”

“Sorry. That's my last stop.”

“Uh, wait a sec,” Steve said; Billy looked over. “What, so is Will your *precious cargo*? You asshole, I thought you were talking about me!” Billy laughed.

It took them a while to get out there. Kasia lived out past Indianapolis and she'd given Billy directions; Steve squinted like an old man (it wasn't that dark in the car) and put the amazing glasses on to read them out from the passenger seat. After he'd gotten them lost twice, Wills took over from the back; even so they weren't really late or anything. Billy parked down the block and then they walked over to the house; Kasia and her roommates lived at the third row-home down the street. The porch lights were all on and there were a couple people smoking out front.

Someone was coming out of the front door as they walked up; Billy didn't wanna walk right in so he rang the doorbell two times. He hoped he had the right house.

Kasia threw the door open and almost cracked Will in the face with it; she was wearin' the same cut-up shirt she'd had on earlier at class and she had a big grin on her face. “Hey! You made it!” She gave Billy a big hug which was okay. With her boots on she was the exact same height as him; that was less okay and more annoying. “Okay, who did you bring me?”

“Hey, I'm Steve, it's nice to meet you.” Harrington shook her hand like a forty-year-old lawyer and gave Kasia the booze that they'd brought.

“Oh, my god, okay, Steve!” Kasia's grin got even bigger and Billy didn't know why; Harrington wasn't even wearing the bumblebee polo. “Thanks a lot, this is great!”

Will was fidgeting away in front of him so Billy pushed him up the first porch steps. “That's Will.”

"Hi," Wills said all shy.

"Hi Will!" She pushed a long strand of her blue hair behind her ear; her eyebrows were raised as she looked over at Billy. "Totally didn't say that you guys had the *same name*," she said happily.

"Where's your dog?" Billy asked her.

Kasia laughed at him. "Oh, do you want to see Peanut? He's hiding, we can go and look for him though." Peanut, Jesus Christ. Oh well. It wasn't the dog's fault.

She led them through into the house; she had a lotta shit in her place, more than Billy had. They met two of her roommates and somehow Will had a beer in his hand before they'd reached the kitchen.

Kasia's girlfriend was this little chick named Maranda or Maria (Billy was pretty sure it was the first one) and she knew who Billy was before he'd even introduced himself. She had a bunch of bouncy brown hair and she talked a lot; Billy got through three beers and a shot of whiskey and she was still goin' on. Apparently she'd graduated from Indiana State a year ago so she and Harrington got into this big conversation about the campus or whatever. That was good because Billy wanted Steve to like his friends, well friend anyway.

Will squared his shoulders up and wandered back into the living room; three girls screamed immediately. "WHOSE CHILD IS THIS?" someone said; Kasia made a great face and slid off of the counter.

"Yeah, I just want to make sure he doesn't run into Valerie," she said and disappeared.

Talking wasn't exactly Billy's favorite thing to do at a party; Harrington seemed okay yapping it up with Kasia's girl though so Billy went off to find more booze.

Will was on the couch being fussed over by two chicks with colored hair. They had Jello-O shots near them so Billy sat down and hung out for a while. The TV was on and a big radio was playing The Kinks. Nobody was dancing or anything which was okay; Billy didn't know if he could do that shit with Harrington even if he got really

drunk. Some guy with a mohawk sat down next to him and gave Billy a beer; he had a cool anchor tattoo so Billy talked to him for a while until he got bored.

He went to find the bathroom and then went back into the kitchen to look for Harrington. Steve was surrounded by three girls like a stud so Billy guessed he was having a good time.

“Okay, but did you hear Springsteen's new album?” Harrington was saying; Billy almost went away again. Steve saw him in the doorway though so Billy had to come over. Steve slung an arm around his shoulder which Billy guessed was okay too. “I saw you talkin' to Mr. Mohawk, are you done?”

“I wasn't talking to him,” Billy said.

“Okay.” Steve looked like Billy was being hilarious.

“We found Peanut, do you want to meet him?” That was Kasia; Billy hadn't even noticed that she'd come back into the kitchen. He hadn't drank like this in a while; maybe he needed to pace himself better. He thought maybe it had been a bad idea to leave Will alone with all the Jell-O shots.

Kasia pulled him back out into the crowded living room and down a little hallway; she put her hands on his shoulders like she was teasing him. “Steve is so sweet, *Bills*, can't wait to tell everyone at class to call you that.” She was too funny.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Stop leaving your boyfriend by himself, he's getting lonely.”

Billy guessed that was a hint or something. He hadn't even seen the dog yet but he went back out to find Steve; he was over on the couch now and he had another beer for Billy. “Are you having fun?”

It was pretty crowded but even so there weren't too many people, maybe a couple dozen – the house was pretty small. Billy hadn't been to any parties since back in the springtime when he and Harrington had been pissed off at each other; he felt okay but maybe like he was doing the wrong thing or something. Tracey'd always gotten pissed at

him and said that he flirted too much when they went out.

He had to lean over close to Steve to talk over the music. "Sorry I left ya."

"That's okay, I like talking. I told like four embarrassing stories about you already," Steve told him. "Do you really talk about me at your school or whatever?"

"No," Billy lied. He definitely didn't tell embarrassing stories about Steve, because he was a nice person.

Steve put an arm around him again and nodded across the room. "Will has got himself like a little fanclub, they're discussing all his letters from camp. Apparently there's subtext." Billy tried not to feel cranky.

It was nice to just be out with Steve or whatever. Billy had never really thought that he could do this, be out with a guy someplace. They weren't even really doing anything but nobody was paying much attention to them anyhow. Billy tried to count how many shots he'd had; the lights and the shadows from the TV and the people passing back and forth made him kinda dizzy. He touched Steve's pretty hair for a while. "You havin' fun?" he asked Harrington.

"Yeah, it's great." Steve was laughing at him; he looked so good or whatever. "Dude, you're so plastered, I can't take you anywhere."

"No I'm not," Billy said. He hadn't even finished his new beer. "Did you see the dog?"

"Oh, my god." Steve picked his hand up like Billy was a little kid and led him back into the kitchen. It was getting pretty late so there were a lot less people around. Peanut was a greyhound and she had a little jacket on; she was totally the best aside from Luke and Leia and aside from Mindy and Jackson in A5. Steve got Billy sittin' up on the counter and kissed him for a while until Will wandered in with a soda and said, "Oh, sorry."

It was way past one which meant that they needed to go soon or come up with a new story to tell Mrs. Byers. Billy got himself under

control and went off to find Kasia and say goodbye. He guessed he was kind of plastered after all; he wondered when he'd stop feeling drunk.

They helped Kasia and her girlfriend pick up the mess in the kitchen and Steve chatted his head off some more. Billy went outside to smoke with Kasia while Steve and Will were still talking to whoever was still left in there.

It was still too warm outside but the breeze felt nice; Billy leaned with his back against the fence and Kasia started pluckin' at his t-shirt. "You have cat hair all over you," she said; apparently she had three cats though Billy didn't remember meeting any of them. She laughed at him when he said that.

"Steve is really nice, I didn't think he'd have so much cute stuff to say about you," she told him. Billy didn't know what Harrington could say about him that could possibly be cute. "What was up with that shirt, though?"

Jesus God. "What's wrong with it?" Billy asked anyway. "My sister picked it out for him."

She was laughing again. "You guys should hang out with us again, not at a party when Marie's stupid friends from class are here."

Marie or Maranda; Billy still wasn't sure. "Sounds good."

Will and Steve came on outside finally. Harrington was eating like his third plate of cake; Billy didn't know where he'd kept getting it from. "Do you wanna go?" he asked with his mouth full. "This is good."

It took about eighty years to say bye because Steve and Kasia kept talking, then they headed on down the street to find the car.

"Where'd you get cake?" Billy asked Harrington.

"Uh, when you're nice to people and actually talk to them, they give you food sometimes." Steve was such a prick. Billy got into the car.

Steve really hadn't drank at all at the party so he was good to drive. Billy guessed it was okay that he'd gotten to have snacks or whatever.

Billy definitely wasn't good to drive enough though he still felt pretty great. He pushed his seat back so's it would recline and crashed backwards into the backseat to look at Will. "Hi."

Will was laughing at him. "Are you okay?"

"Did ya have fun?" Billy asked him.

"I think so," Will said slowly like he was thinking about. "I was still mostly surrounded by girls, which is not exactly what I want." He made Billy laugh too much.

"Bill, can you come back here?" Steve was saying. He made a face and adjusted the amazing glasses; they were all smudged now. "UH, okay, someone needs to tell me if I make a right or a left at this light up here."

"What light?" Billy said. Will put a hand on Billy's chair and pushed him back up. Steve got them lost three times.

They got back to Hawkins and dropped Will back at his house. All the lights were out so Billy hoped that Joyce wasn't sitting up waitin' to murder him; it was past three AM. They sat in the car and watched to make sure that Will didn't get kidnapped or abducted by any monsters as he went inside, then Steve took them back to Billy's apartment.

Billy was still a little drunk; he had another beer to calm himself down and Steve took a couple shots from the expensive tequila he'd bought Billy out in the city to catch up. "What do you wanna do, do you wanna watch *Alien*?" Steve asked him.

Billy had a couple ideas. He felt like he should light the frickin' candles again or something. "Can do something else if you want," he said; Steve started smiling at him.

Maxine came bumbling back into the apartment a little before noon. Billy'd been about half-awake and he woke up a little more when he heard her start crashin' around in the kitchen. Had to be Max; there was nobody louder than her on a Sunday morning when he was hungover as fuck.

Steve groaned loudly and rolled over; he'd been flopped out on his stomach with his face in the pillow and snoring like a troll. "Oh, my god, my head's gonna explode." He buried his face in Billy's armpit and mumbled, "S'that Max?" Then he said, "Ugh, Bill, you *reek*."

Billy debated crushing his face in a headlock but decided against it. Harrington'd given him about the best night of his life last night, before the party and then after, so he figured he could show some mercy. Anyway Steve was still a prick; Billy's deodorant was 24-hours. It wasn't the cheap shit either.

He shrugged his shoulder until Steve grumbled and finally moved away. He put his face down on Billy's pillow instead; they were still real close. He had a sleep-crease from the mattress trailing down the side of his temple; Billy traced it with a hand and then messed up his hair.

"Mm." Steve smiled one of his doofy morning-smiles. He had like three or four. "Hi," he said all cute like a little nerd.

"Hey," Billy said back anyway like a dope; it couldn't be helped. "Feel okay?"

"Mm," Steve said again. "I think so. Need coffee."

Billy flipped him over onto his back and rolled on top of him; Steve laughed and let himself be pinned. "That what you need?"

"Oh, I don't know. Do you have something else to give me?" Jesus Christ Harrington was so fucking smooth sometimes, especially in the morning before Billy got his wits about him.

It was too early for him to think up something cutesy to say back so he leaned down and kissed Steve; Steve kissed him back and started making his happy little sounds into Billy's mouth. He was kinda like a

cat or somethin' too, like when you'd pat Chewy and she'd start doing her surprised little chirrups.

Max kicked at the door like an uncivilized monster. "Hey, are you losers awake yet?"

Steve's mouth froze smushed against his and he crinkled up his face a little. "We are now."

"I *said* I was coming back over!"

"FUCK OFF!" Billy told her. Jesus she was so annoying.

Max kicked the door again. "I'm making french toast!" she yapped.

That was substantially less annoying. "...OKAY," Billy said; Harrington laughed at him.

It still took them a while to wake up and then get up – Billy thought it'd been something like six AM by the time they'd actually gotten to sleep. Steve got up to shower again and came back wearing yet another one of Billy's t-shirts. He sat on the edge of the bed lookin' down at Billy, who hadn't moved yet. "Last night was okay?"

Billy didn't know if he was talking about the party or the sex thing after; Steve had gotten *three fingers* inside of him last night. "Yeah, good."

"Okay. Good." Steve kept on looking at him and smiling like a little dope.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just looking at you," Harrington said; Billy guessed that Steve was teasing him or whatever. He finally got dressed too and they wandered on out into the living room.

Max was crashed out at the kitchen table and she wasn't making french toast; she was doing the crossword puzzle. She still had her stupid pajamas on – Billy guessed she'd walked herself back over from Eliane's – and she looked up and narrowed her eyes at the boys. "God, you look like you got run over by a truck," she told Steve;

Harrington made a face at her.

"Yeah, thanks, Max, I feel like it too." He was rubbing his eyes like a little kid.

"What the hell, man, I thought you were cooking," Billy told her.

"I'm going to! I just want to finish this before *Steve* steals it and writes all the wrong words!"

"I don't do that," Harrington said. He had done it one time, to be funny.

Billy collapsed down onto the couch and Steve sat down next to him. "Can you at least make me some fucking coffee?" he begged Max.

"Oh, my *god*." She got up though and started slamming shit around in the cabinet. "So did you guys have fun at your stupid party that you took *Will* to instead of *me*?"

"Yeah, we had a great time," Steve said like an asshole; Billy looked up and laughed at the face Maxine was making. "Come on, I thought you wanted to go to El's house anyway!"

"That was before I knew you were taking *Will*!"

"How you know about it already?" Billy asked her.

"Please, he called Mike at like eight in the morning, me and El heard all about it already. You guys are *so unfair*." She was startin' up with her womanly hysteria, also spilling coffee grinds all over the counter.

Harrington turned the TV on with the remote and started clicking through the channels. "Ooh, *nice*!" he said happily; there was a marathon of *The Golden Girls* on NBC until four-thirty. He stretched out and slung an arm around Billy's shoulder. "Hope you didn't want to go out today."

"Don't think I can really move too much," Billy said; Steve gave him one of his real nice smiles.

Max bustled around the kitchen making their coffee as Steve and

Billy watched the TV. A few minutes later she sat down on the edge of the couch with the Donald Duck mug and a packet of crackers.

Billy felt cranky; she was crinkling the package and there was supposed to be french toast. "I thought you were makin' breakfast."

"I will in a minute!" She was already too distracted by the TV so Billy reluctantly dragged himself up off the couch to get coffee for himself and Harrington.

"Oh, thanks," Steve said when Billy came back over and handed him a mug. "Uh, did you put –"

Harrington had only been stayin' over all summer; Billy knew how he took his coffee. "I didn't put any sugar in it, I know what you like." Steve gave him doofy morning-smile number three.

They all laid around and watched the TV for a while. Billy was a little hungry but not enough so's to actually get up and make something; he settled for swiping the rest of Maxine's peanut butter crackers.

Max let Billy eat her food and mostly ignored him, was about her favorite thing to do. She and Harrington were havin' a great time together talking about the party and what-all Max and Elijane had gotten up to last night. Hop had had to work early today, and El had wanted to go to Mike's house, which explained Max was back to bug Billy already. Apparently the chief had let the girls watch *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers* and made them chicken enchiladas for dinner; Steve and Billy both paused as they took in the mental image of that.

"I didn't think Hopper could, uh, cook or whatever," Harrington said.

"He got the recipe from Dustin's mom," Max told him; Steve laughed.

Bringing up Henderson's name made the kid appear: he showed up a little past one knocking on the door, then just fucking walked right on in like he lived there too. Steve and Max spent a couple minutes yelling at him for it.

Apparently Henderson had heard all about the party already too – "Jesus, why does everybody care so much about what we're doin'?" Steve asked all cranky like he hadn't sat Max down last night for an

hour and made her help him pick out a fuckin' outfit to wear.

"Mostly because you're the only people we hang out with that have cars," Henderson told him; Steve made a face. He and Billy were layin' all over on each other on the couch but Henderson didn't say anything about it. He was more interested in asking Steve if there had been any cute girls at the party.

"Uh, I mean, they mostly had girlfriends," Steve said. Billy wondered if Harrington had been noticin' the girls anyway; maybe he should have spent less time searching for booze.

Henderson looked even more interested because he was a fucking troll. "Okay, now, wait." He made a stupid motion with his hands. "When you say *girlfriends* – "

"Dustin! What are you *doing here*?" Maxine went off on him; he was talkin' over the TV.

"Oh, my god, I just wanted to borrow some video games! I can't talk to my friends for five minutes?"

"What friends?" Max asked like an asshole; Billy laughed.

"Ha, ha, ha. Not you, Max!" She smirked at him.

"Have at 'em, you can just take what you want," Harrington said. Billy was pretty sure the kids had all been slobbering about havin' some *Castlevania* night or some shit over here but that hadn't happened yet on account of all the sex that he and Steve had been having. Haha.

Henderson gathered up the games he wanted and then just crashed out on the couch like he lived there; Steve kept on hitting him with one of Billy's books. He watched *The Golden Girls* with them for about twenty minutes until Billy got tired of his running commentary and Steve laughing at it. "Man, I'm so fucking hungover right now, you don't need to be here."

"Fine, whatever, I've already seen this one like three times." Jesus God. Henderson stood up finally and looked over at Billy. "Are we still going running tomorrow?"

“Yeah, I'll meet ya.”

“Okay! Uh, you owe me batteries for my radio, also, don't think I didn't see that dent in the side – “

“Bye, Dustin,” Max said pointedly.

“Jesus Christ! Okay, okay! Bye Steve! Bye Max, bye Billy, *I guess.*” Henderson spent five more minutes re-shuffling his games and talkin' even more.

“You guys, ah, could be a little nicer to him,” Harrington said once Dustin had gone; he didn't sound that mad or anything.

“What? That was like the nicest I've been all summer,” Max said. Steve laughed a little.

It was getting kind of late already – almost three – and they all argued about what to eat for a while. The rain was still coming down outside and no one really wanted to get cleaned up and get dressed to go out, even just to go to the supermarket.

Max got up to take inventory of the fridge and decided she could make garlic bread. She turned the stove on to preheat it and started moving around in the kitchen again, getting her stuff set up. Billy stretched out on the couch and laid his head down in Steve's lap, facing the TV. Steve threaded his hands in Billy's hair which felt nice.

Billy laid there for a while listening to the TV and listening to Max and Steve argue; maybe after he ate he'd just go back to bed. He and Harrington could go out somewhere later if Steve wanted.

Steve laughed at the TV real loud like a nerd, running his fingers through Billy's hair. The girls had a termite problem and no money but Blanche was dead-set on meetin' Burt Reynolds. “Oh my god, Blanche is so funny.”

Billy decided not to get in an argument with him right now; he was still too sleepy. Everybody knew Dorothy was the best one.

There was a loud knock on the door and everyone looked up. Over in the kitchen, Maxine huffed all put-upon and slammed her tray down

onto the counter. “Oh, my god, I swear, if this is Dustin again,” she went off ominously. She raised her voice: “DOOR'S OPEN.”

The door swung open. It wasn't Dustin; it was Billy's dad. Everything froze, and he just stood in the doorway looking at them.

Billy didn't know what to do for a second – he didn't even pick his head up off of Steve's lap. He hadn't seen his old man in a couple of months and he hadn't really given a thought to him. His dad looked real put-together even though it was a Sunday: he was wearin' one of his white work shirts tucked into his pants, all fancy-like like he was headin' into the office.

Neil looked around the apartment, taking it all in. Billy's and Harrington's jackets, tossed onto the kitchen table from last night, and Max and her mess at the counter: all of her stupid candles strewn out on the coffee table still and her fuckin' weed pipe and their empty coffee mugs. Steve in his jeans and wearing Billy's Parental Advisory shirt, and Billy laying there with his head in Steve's lap, Steve's hand in his hair. His dad stared at them; he stared at Billy laying on Steve. He said, “What the *hell's* going on in here?”

Shit. Billy sat up – he should have done that right away. He felt kinda frozen or something – he felt fucking *stupid*, almost dirty or something. Beside him, he could feel Steve stiffening up, too; their shoulders knocked together for a moment.

Billy forced himself to speak. “Man, you can't just fucking come in here.”

“Yeah, I'm not here for you,” Neil told him in this dismissive tone. He just started walking right on into Billy's apartment and Billy felt *fucking stupid*, watching him come in.

“So what are you here for?” Billy heard himself say. It didn't even sound like his voice; he wouldn't sound that small.

Billy's dad looked at him like he hated him, like he already knew. His blue eyes narrowed and Billy felt about eight years old, caught doin' the wrong thing again. “I didn't come here for you, you and your – your – whatever, whatever *cutesy* shit you're doing here with your

little boyfriend right now, I didn't come here for that. I came here for your sister.” He said again, almost wonderingly, “What the *hell* is going on in here?”

Billy already felt fucking horrible but his dad made him feel even worse in about a minute. He'd never really – he'd never really thought about his old man showing up here, but of course he should have thought about it. Only lived about six blocks away from the old house. Billy'd been acting all summer like he wouldn't have to deal with his old man, even though he knew Max was going through the shit with him. He'd just never thought that his dad would actually *come here*, walk right in, askin' for Max. Billy couldn't even think up some smart shit to say, like *she's right over there*. He just stared at his dad.

“What do you *want*?” Max said from over in the kitchen; Billy guessed she could still think up some smart shit to say.

“I already said what I want, I want you to get the hell out of here. You're going to come home with me right now. You know you never called your mother last night – ”

“She already *knows* where I am! I told her I was going to Billy's!”

Billy just sat on the couch like a frozen statue as his dad went past him. He couldn't make himself turn around to look at Max, but something clanked out in the kitchen, maybe another pan or somethin'. “Oh yeah? She knows what's going on at Billy's house? She knows what he's doin' over here?”

“It's not his house, it's an *apartment!*” Maxine said like a total asshole.

“You don't need to be over at Billy's seeing all the crap he's been up to. What have you been doing, hanging out here all summer with him and his little boyfriend? They makin' you do something?”

“What the *fuck*,” Steve said softly from beside him. He shifted away again like he was meaning to stand up. “Okay, I, uh – “ he raised his voice. “Hey, listen, this is really not a big deal – “

“Shut up,” Billy heard his dad say. “Don't think I was talking to you.”

"He's not his *boyfriend!*" Max said, lied for him really. Billy just sat there and listened to her lie. He felt like a fucking asshole – he should have thought about this shit. There had been a reason why he hadn't let himself admit for so long that he'd had a thing for Harrington last year; the reason was right here. "They're not even *doing* anything!"

"Oh, wow. Yeah, that's really nice, I bet they didn't do anything last week either when they took you outta the goddamn *state* – "

"We didn't go out of the state, WE WENT TO A LAKE, YOU MORON!" Maxine yelled back like a crazy person. Billy still couldn't see what was going on. "You can't tell me what to do, you're not my dad!"

"Where's your dad at?" Neil asked her; Max didn't say anything. "Yeah, that's what I thought, fucking smart-ass. You need to come home right now, you don't need to see this shit."

"They're not even *doing anything!*" Max said again: just them talking about it was making Billy feel so fucking sick or something. They *hadn't* even been doing shit, but – they coulda been.

He was thinking about the million fucking times he'd left his door unlocked since he'd got his place and the million fucking times his old man coulda walked in on him and Harrington. All the kids had been around all summer, watchin' him and Steve parade around like they were out in fantasy-land or some shit. Tonguing in front of the kids; Billy'd made Steve go fucking *roller-skating* with him. At Kasia's place last night, Harrington kissing him, and he hadn't cared who'd known. Billy didn't know why he'd thought he'd be *okay* here; it was still the real world. He felt fucking *stupid*. He just sat there.

"Get *off* of me!" Max said from in the kitchen; something clattered again. "Are you *serious?*" Steve was twisting around on the couch to look, but Billy just sat there still.

Billy's dad dragged Max out into the middle of the living room. They looked *wrong* in the living room somehow; Neil looked totally out of place. It was like a fucking horror movie or some shit.

It probably wasn't hard for his dad to drag Max around – Billy figured she weighed about a buck-fifteen soaking wet. He guessed the sound

earlier had been his old man grabbin' at her. Max shoved at Neil and he made a face, twisting her arm to yank her closer to him.

“Yeah, we're going.” He looked over at Billy; his cold eyes said a million things. “I'm not dealing with your faggot shit right now, I'll come and see you later. We can have a real nice talk, if you want,” he said; Billy'd heard that crap before about a thousand times. He just kept sitting there and staring back at his dad.

Steve had already been standin' up while Billy was still just frozen there like a lump. He crossed the room real fast and grabbed at Neil's shoulder. Billy watched him do it; it was weird to see, somebody coming for his old man. His dad's shoulder hitched and his head turned to the side sharply, almost like he'd already forgotten that Harrington was there. Steve said, “Hey, yeah, you really can't take her outta here if she doesn't wanna go – ”

“Oh, you don't want to start with me right now.” Neil reached out to shove Steve away, not gently.

It happened really fast. He caught Steve in the throat and sent him sprawling back against the edge of the coffee table; Steve bumped into it and staggered backwards. He made a kinda choked sound and collapsed back onto the couch. He looked all shocked and shit with his brown eyes all wide. “Jesus, the fuck – “

“What the hell, you're INSANE!” Max went off. Her face was bright red and Billy's dad still had a hold on her, high up on her forearm near her wrist.

He jerked her towards himself again. Billy watched Max's hair flow out behind her as she stumbled forward; her little eyes bugged out. “Let go of me!” She looked totally shocked just like Steve did, and like she was starting to get scared. “What the hell are you *doing*?”

“I said we're going home.”

“YOU'RE HURTING ME!”

His dad was starting to grin now and that was bad. His face was turning red too; he kinda looked like a monster. “Oh, girly, I don't

really think you know what *hurt* is,” he said; Billy stared at him.

He sounded fucking delighted; he looked it as well. His grin was stretchin' his face like he was The Joker in the *Batman* comics Sinclair had lent Billy the other month. He didn't even look real. “Think you and me need to have a little talk before we go and see your mom.”

Max was still struggling. “I'm not GOING with you! Let me GO!” She tried to wrench her arm away again which always made it worse. “Billy!”

“Don't talk to him, he's not gonna do shit for you,” Neil told her right away. “I knew this shit was happening, I *fucking* knew, I knew you kids were doing some perverted shit over here, how long have you been – “

“WE'RE NOT *DOING* ANYTHING, YOU *ASSHOLE!*” Max roared. Was definitely the wrong thing for her to say; Neil yanked her some more. They were almost at the door now. “YOU'RE *HURTING ME!*” she yelled again. God she sounded real scared.

Billy just stared at her; he stared at her and his dad. Whenever his old man would get real crazy like this, it felt like Billy was always staring, or watching, or some shit. Even when he'd been a kid and he'd been gettin' hit, it'd always felt like he was just staring and taking it, as though it was something he was just watching. Like it wasn't really happenin' to him, even when it would hurt real bad. It kinda felt like when you was watching a movie or a tape or something. Like before the big climax or whatever, when you knew the character was gonna do the wrong thing, and you wanted to get up and change the channel.

Except Billy couldn't really change the channel, not ever. It was like a nightmare or something but it was just his life. He felt totally frozen.

Max's eyes were so big and she looked so scared; Billy always forgot how little she was. She looked so fuckin' scared – she looked like her little ten-year-old self watching her moms get yelled at for the first time.

Billy'd always – shit. He'd watched his old man push his mom around

for his whole damn life, then he'd watched Neil push Susan around too, not quite in the same way, not yet at least. His old man had been pushin' Max around, too, for going on five years now; that was half a decade. Billy'd always just watch. It got worse and worse, and he never really did too much about it – he didn't know how; he'd used to tell himself he didn't care.

He remembered back last summer when his old man had been yankin' Max around in the living room, grabbing her fucking face, and how Billy'd thought she'd looked just like his mom, all skinny with her red hair flyin' out behind her, shocked and bug-eyed. Back in February with Max and Sinclair out in the yard getting tossed around and she'd looked just like his mom, so small, and far away.

She didn't really look like his mom now, though. She just looked like Max, annoying and familiar, *right there*. It made him feel like something was breaking inside of him, this big hurt thing that split him right down the middle. It made him feel small too. Whatever it was that had broken had wiped all of the scared parts away, and he just felt angry. He felt really fucking angry.

Billy got up off the couch. He didn't quite seem to be in his body. “Yeah, I think you wanna let her go, man.”

Neil laughed at him. He'd been laughing at Billy for about his whole damn life, too, it seemed; the sound fuzzed around in Billy's head. His dad was *still* grabbing Maxine's arm – his fingers around her wrist were bright red. “Oh, do you think that?” he asked Billy.

“Just let her go her and get out, I'll take her home to her mom later.”

“I'm not GOING HOME,” Max mouthed off like a little moron; Neil shook her around some more.

“Shut up,” he told her roughly. Max's face twisted up.

“Get off her,” Billy said. He didn't want to do this; he couldn't believe his dad was gonna make him do this.

Neil yanked Max forward again; she stumbled like a rag doll and nearly tripped. Her eyes were still so big and she was just looking at

Billy and Billy knew it was gonna be bad this time. If his dad took her it was gonna be bad. "What are you gonna do about it? You wanna say something?" his old man asked; Billy stared at him and didn't answer.

Neil laughed some more. "Yeah, that's what I thought." He put his other hand on the doorknob – he really thought he was gonna fuckin' leave. He really thought he was gonna fuckin' take her, so Billy stalked across the room and grabbed his dad by the collar of his stupid work shirt. He picked him up and threw him into the wall by the door; Max screamed loudly.

"I *said* get the *fuck* off my sister," Billy said and punched his dad in the face.

It didn't really feel like anything. Billy'd hit his old man a couple of times before, mostly when he'd been a lot younger, these fuckin' baby punches he'd got in when his dad had really been wailing on him. He'd never actually slugged him in the face before but it didn't feel like anything; his hand didn't even hurt. His dad's face rocked sideways and he lost his balance and slid down against the wall a couple inches.

Neil grabbed the front of Billy's shirt; his fingers dug into Billy's ribs. He launched himself forward like he wanted to ram into him. Billy wasn't expectin' that because he wasn't expecting anything and his feet flung out from beneath himself like in a cartoon.

They both sailed backwards and Billy went through the coffee table, *hard*. It didn't really feel like anything and it happened so fast. The glass didn't even make too much of a noise.

"OH, MY *FUCKING GOD!*" he heard Harrington say like a crazy sports newscaster. He sounded real far away somehow but Billy knew that couldn't actually be true.

Even still Billy didn't really feel that hurt or nothing yet. His dad hit him hard in the face and that didn't hurt yet either. Billy sat up and grabbed his old man by the shirt-collar again and flipped them over, then jammed his knee hard into his dad's stomach.

Neil had knocked over the trailing ivy plant Harrington had got him, too. All of Billy's books that he'd had on the coffee table were covered in potting soil – all his nice shit was getting ruined. “YOU FUCKING FUCK, THAT TABLE COST ME FORTY DOLLARS!” Billy screamed. He punched his dad in the face again; Neil picked up the ivy plant and smashed it against the side of Billy's head. The pot was that expensive ceramic shit so it *fucking* hurt. “MOTHERFUCK – “ Billy hit him again.

“You little shit – “ His dad's fingers were fluttering and scratching around Billy's face like he wanted to blind him; Billy smacked one hand away and then hauled off and slugged his dad right in the mouth.

“DON'T FUCKING TOUCH ME!” He hit his dad, again, and then again. Neil slapped him across the face like he was a fuckin' five-year-old girl so Billy picked his dad's head up in his hands and slammed it back down against the floor. That didn't do too much on account of the fancy shag carpeting so he did it again, three more times. He felt real dizzy; he was pretty sure he was still screamin' some crazy shit. He punched his dad in the face again. And again. And again. And –

Someone caught his wrist; it was Steve and he was kneeling over him. “Bill,” he said in a weird voice. “Stop, come on. Look at him. You're gonna – he's not gonna be able to walk out of here.”

Billy didn't even know what he meant for a second and then he did. He looked down at his dad: he was just looking back at Billy, kinda dazed almost. His old man's nose was bleeding and his mouth was bleeding and one eye was bloodshot and there was fuckin' dirt on his face from where the plant vase had exploded.

Really, Billy thought there could be more blood. He could roll his dad out later if he had to. “Lemme fuckin' go,” he said.

Steve didn't let him go. He wasn't holding on too hard, though. “Maybe, ah, you don't wanna do all this,” he said real careful. Billy looked up at him; his other hand was still twisted up in his dad's shirt, holding him down.

Steve just stared at him too, then he finally let Billy's wrist go. “You

can stop,” he told Billy. “If you want. Maybe you don't wanna take it that far. Maybe you do. That's, that's up to you. I'm, uh, I'm with you either way.”

Neil laughed and spit some blood out of his mouth; it landed on the carpet near Harrington's knee. “That's beautiful, you fuckin' faggot, real heroic,” he slurred; *herryoic*. His mouth looked kinda mushy, like maybe Billy'd dislodged a couple teeth. He hoped so.

Steve's expression changed and his face got really cold; Billy'd never seen him look like that before. “Okay, yeah, you know what, actually you can keep beating the shit out of him,” he said. “That's fine too.”

Billy stared at Steve, and then he stared at his dad, too. His old man wasn't really moving or tryin' to get away anymore; he was just laying in the dirt and the broken glass on the carpet with his arms splayed out. He wasn't really fighting anymore. He wasn't fighting anymore because Billy was stronger than him. It didn't really matter that he was still laughing.

Billy felt this great big void open up in himself; it felt like nineteen years had gotten ripped out of him. It didn't feel great like he'd thought, gettin' one up on his old man.

It didn't really feel like anything. He just felt really hollow – sad, almost, and he felt scared and angry, too. That was like three whole emotions and it made him feel real dizzy.

His hand was still in a fist, hovering over his dad's face. He forced himself to unclench it. He had glass in his knuckles and it stung; there was a lot of blood on his hand. He wondered if that meant there was glass in his old man's face. He hoped it hurt.

Billy cleared his throat and then spit; it landed right on his dad's cheekbone. He pushed himself up and stood there lookin' down at his father: his stupid fuckin' Oxford work shirt all wrinkled up and bloodied and his face fucked all up, covered in blood and spit. Billy'd done that but his dad had done that too, coming for him.

He locked eyes with Neil. “You don't fuckin' touch me anymore,” he said. His voice wasn't even shaking; he didn't know how. “Don't

fuckin' come around here. You come back here, you ever touch my fuckin' sister or my fuckin' boyfriend again, I'll *kill* you. You hear me? I'll kill you."

Neil didn't answer so Billy kicked him in the side, not as hard as he coulda. "YOU FUCKIN' HEAR ME?" He kicked his dad again, this time not so gently.

"*Billy!*" Maxine was right next to him somehow and she grabbed at the hem of his t-shirt, then she wrapped her arms around his waist. He wasn't exactly sure if she was trying to hold him back, or trying to hold herself up. "Just – just stop, okay? He's not even worth it!"

"Could still fuckin' answer me." Billy looked at his old man again and felt blood pounding behind his eyes; he still wanted to hurt him. "You fuckin' hear me or not?"

His dad stared back at him for a long time. His blue eyes looked like poison and there was blood and snot coming out of his nose.

Billy was pretty sure this was gonna be the last time he saw his old man. If there was a next time Billy'd probably be gettin' killed; one of them would be anyway. Their eyes locked; Billy still felt like he'd lose if he looked away.

"I hear you," Neil said finally. It was so quiet.

"Okay," Billy said.

It was so quiet. Max let go of his t-shirt and then she grabbed his arm, trying to pull him away.

Billy let himself be pulled. The carpet swirled in front of him, felt like he was gonna fall over. "Don't fuckin' be here when I get back," he told his dad; he couldn't look at him anymore. He grabbed his keys off of the bookshelf and stalked out of the apartment. He didn't know where he was going but he couldn't in be there anymore.

After a moment Steve and Max followed him out into the hallway; Billy guessed that was good. He closed the door up and then they all stood there lookin' at each other. Max was holding her left arm cradled up against her chest like a baby bird's wing. "You okay?"

Billy asked her.

She was looking up at him like he was a stranger or something, or maybe it just felt that way. Her eyes were so big, impossibly so. "I – think so," she said tremulously; Billy noticed she was crying.

He couldn't really deal with seein' that right now. He turned away and looked over at Harrington. In two seconds he felt real embarrassed or bashful or nervous or something, almost sick; he didn't know how he felt. It was fuckin' awful, feeling that way with Steve. He'd never really wanted Steve to see the way his old man treated him and Max, the way his old man got to him. He almost couldn't look at him either. "You okay?" he asked again. He felt real surprised his voice wasn't wobbling like Maxine's.

Steve obviously wasn't fuckin' crying like Max was but he did look kinda shell-shocked or somethin'. His eyes were still huge too and he looked paler than a ghost. In the weak light from the hallway lamp he looked sickly. He was just staring at Billy in this real weird way and Billy didn't know what it meant; maybe it was bad. "Sure," was all he said. He stared at Billy some more. "I ... got your shoes," he said in this weird strained voice.

"Oh. Thanks." There was this awkward moment as Billy toed his Converse on, and then they all looked around some more.

Max was still sniffing like a little kid and Billy wanted to die. "Arm okay?" he asked her.

"I – guess. Where should we go?"

"Dunno." Billy started down the steps and they followed him. It was so hard to look at Harrington so Billy didn't. Fake Kevin Costner from A5 was down in the lobby lookin' through his mail and he stared at all three of them as they walked out. Nobody said anything.

They got down onto the street and then just stood around on the corner of Broad and Clearfield by the old bike shop that no one ever went into. A glance at his (Steve's) wrist-watch told him that it was just past four PM, but it felt a lot later: the sky was all grey and it was rainin' out pretty hard now.

Max and Steve were both staring at him again like he was some kinda science experiment that'd gotten loose, maybe a Demodog or somethin', whatever the fuck they called those things. Still nobody was saying anything. They all just stood there like morons.

"What are we gonna do?" Max asked finally; she was asking Billy.

"Dunno." Billy's heart was pounding so hard that it felt like it was gonna burst up in his throat and choke him. He stood there feeling like he was gonna explode. He felt like total shit – it was pouring down rain and Max was still just in her fuckin' pajamas.

The two of them just stared back so finally Billy looked away again. There was this ringing in his ears like he'd gotten boxed about the head or something; it made him feel too dizzy and like he needed to sit down. His face hurt where his dad had cracked him with the stupid houseplant.

"I'm – sorry that I let him in!" Max burst out; she was *still* crying. "I didn't think he'd come here!"

He felt even dizzier. "Yeah, that's okay."

"Well, what – where should we go? What are we gonna do?" she asked him again. "We can't just – leave him in your apartment, he'll totally trash everything once he gets up!"

Billy didn't know why Maxine was always askin' him what he was gonna do about shit. She'd been around him for five years now; she should know by now that he never had any fuckin' clue what he was doing. "I know that," he said anyway.

"We could, uh – just go to my place," Steve said finally, still in a weird voice.

Billy thought about it and decided. It was scary to decide. "I gotta make a phone call."

"Yeah, you can use the phone when we – "

"Nah. I gotta do it now." He'd lose his nerve by the time he got to Harrington's; he knew that. He started walking down the street and

Max and Steve followed after him, a couple paces behind. No one was talkin' again and they all crossed the street in silence.

At the corner of Broad and Main there was a phone booth with bright red metal siding and big glass panes like in an old movie. Billy went on inside it and dug around in his jeans' pocket until he found a quarter.

Max followed him right up to the window and pressed her nose against the glass, staring, so Billy turned away. He didn't think he'd remember the number but he punched it into the phone without really thinking. Fuck. Fuck.

The line rang four times, too-loud and echoing in his ear; Billy almost hung up. "Hawkins police department," some goon drawled.

Billy couldn't talk for a couple seconds. The line buzzed and the person on the other end cleared their throat. "Hello?" Fuck.

"Yeah, lemme talk to Hopper." He pressed the phone tight against his ear.

"Uh, all right, what's – what's the nature of the call? If someone's hurt we suggest you hang up and call 911, otherwise we have several deputies on hand who could – "

"He in today? Just put him on the fuckin' phone."

"Uh, he's here. What's the – "

"Tell him it's Billy Hargrove calling, he knows me," Billy said. He had no clue if that would do shit or what; probably not. "Just tell 'im."

There was a long pause. "All right, let me ... see if he's available." The line clicked and then some elevator music started playing. That was too-loud too.

Billy twisted around a little and wrapped the metal phone cord around his wrist. He still felt crazy-dizzy; he leaned against the side of the glass booth and looked out.

Steve was standing on the sidewalk curb in front of Billy with his

shoulders hunched over and his hands in the pockets of his dorky khakis. That felt really far away. Max was still perched in front of the phone booth about six inches away, not far, and staring at Billy like a crazy person. Her eyes were so fuckin' big that she didn't even look like a real person: her bright freckles looked like needle-marks against her pale face. *What are you doing?* she mouthed through the glass. Billy turned away again.

Hopper came on the line. "Yeah? Who is this?"

"Uh. Hey, it's me."

"What happened? You all right?"

Billy couldn't tell if the chief sounded pissed off or not. He wasn't exactly thinking about that. "Sorry to call you at work," he said like a dope and then realized he'd fuckin' meant to call him at work. He knew the chief would be there; Max had said he'd gone in earlier.

"What happened?" Hop said again.

Billy's throat felt like sandpaper or something, tearing up his words before they could come out. "I, uh," he said and then stopped.

He tried to start again. It was hard to do it, and he didn't know what he was going to say yet. "Yeah, uh, my, my dad busted into my place and was shakin' my sister all over the fuckin' living room, can you come and get him?"

The line crackled. "Wait, *what?*" Hopper said sharply. "Are you guys all right?"

"Yeah." No. Billy felt really stupid. "You said if he came around you could –"

"Okay, yeah, you need to tell me what happened," Hop interrupted him.

"Sorry, I –"

"That's not his house, he doesn't need to be there. What happened, did you invite him in?" Hop's voice was really loud.

"Door wasn't locked, we ain't know it was him." That sounded bad. Billy didn't know what to say; he didn't quite know what he was doing. It'd just happened but he barely even remembered gettin' to the phone booth. "I was with – " Fuck. He didn't want to bring Steve into it. Hopper knew, had to know with all the shit, but he didn't want to bring Steve into it. "I was with a – I, I was with a guy," he stammered out. "My dad – he got real mad."

There was a long silence. "Is Maxine all right?" Hopper asked him.

"I wasn't doing nothin' to her," Billy told him right away.

"That's not what I – " the line crackled and Hopper made a weird noise like a tea kettle goin' off. "I meant *your father*, did he touch the girl?"

Billy looked over at Max again; she was still pressed against the window and looking at him like a little nutcase with her goddamn eyeballs poppin' out of her head. The top of her grey tank top was dark with the rain comin' down on it, and her forearm was still bright red where Billy's old man had grabbed her. It'd be purple in a while; Billy knew that.

He chewed on his lip. "Got a big mark on her arm," he said finally.

"*Shit*. All right. Okay," Hop said. "Where is he now, are you guys in your building with him?"

"Went outside, I'm at that payphone across the street," Billy said. "He's still in there. I hit him a couple times." That sounded bad too. That was bad – he was pretty sure. His old man hadn't hit *him*, not really, but he'd hit his old man, a lot. That was bad. He wasn't like a kid anymore where he could get away with shit like that.

"That's okay, I can deal with that," Hopper told him; he had his business voice on. "That's breaking and entering and that's *assault*, I can deal with that." Billy didn't know if the chief meant that for him or for his old man.

"I dunno what to – " Billy couldn't talk again and it made him feel too small again, like drowning or something. He felt stuck; it was like

this cacophony of voices and the rain beating down on him. It was too much. There was so much to say; there was so much he couldn't say.

He could feel his dad throwin' him down the basement steps a year ago, how his arm had snapped and then the rush of pain, burning red. How Max had had to help him back up the stairs like he was a little kid, how bad he'd been shakin'. He felt a slap to his face – a million of 'em – and he felt himself hit the windowsill, his mom's record player bustin' on the floor, the last thing he had. Burning red on the back of his neck, the hot sizzle against his skin, his old man holding him still. He could see his dad's arm around his mom's throat, her red hair like a river; he was holding her over the banister of the staircase at their old place, and Billy couldn't remember if she'd been screaming. Max's blank eyes as his old man shook her around a year ago, the same eyes as his mom's. It wasn't the same – he could do something. His old man's mean grin, the same grin as Billy's. *Looks real nice, don't she.* Jesus. He wanted to say *my whole life*. He couldn't say any of that; he'd never stop. He said, “You ... said I could call you if he started some shit with us again.”

Hopper didn't say anything for a couple seconds. “Yeah. Sure, I meant that.”

“Can you come get him or somethin'?” Billy asked him. Hop didn't answer right away and Billy felt like a fucking baby. Maybe he sounded too crazy or too stupid. His head hurt from where the hard metal of the phone receiver was pressed against his ear; his hand hurt from when he'd hauled off and slugged his dad. He said, “You said you'd help me.”

There was this long silence again and Billy was starting to think he'd been wrong again, like wrong about everything. Maybe he was too much work or something. It wasn't like he'd never gotten in trouble back in California; Hop probably had papers on him. Maybe it looked bad now, him tellin' the chief how he'd hit his old man, just for coming into his place. Maybe he'd even –

“Yeah, I can help you. Of *course* I can help you,” Hopper told him and Billy wanted to cry. Like he really wanted to cry; he turned away from Max again and pressed his forehead against the glass of the

phone booth. "I been talking to your stepmother the whole goddamn summer, she won't say shit to me."

Billy didn't know what to say again. "I didn't know about that."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Uh, I dunno." This was too much shit; Billy felt like he was gonna break apart. He cradled the phone against his shoulder and pressed a hand against his eyes, *hard*, just for a second. "She said – she didn't tell me 'bout nothing – "

"I just mean tonight."

"Oh. Okay." He tried to think. "He just, uh – my dad – he came into my place, I was on the couch with ... " Shit. "Maxine was like over in the kitchen, my dad wanted to take her out, he said – I wasn't doing nothin' to her," Billy said again; he thought he was kinda stammering really. "Her mom said it's okay, y'know, she, she hangs out with me."

"I know that," Hopper said in a weird voice. It was kinda strained or something; Billy didn't know why. "That's okay. Keep going."

"I dunno," Billy said again. He wasn't sure how many times he could say *I don't know* before he got fuckin' hung up on. "He wanted to take her out, she didn't wanna go. We told him to get out, he didn't wanna get out. He got real mad. I was with – uh – I was with – "

"Yeah, I know who you were with," Hop said, still in the weird voice. "That's okay," he said again.

Okay. "I was with – uh, he – my dad – he pushed, uh, he pushed Harrington around, he pushed me around, he wouldn't, uh, he wouldn't leave. Yellin' and shit, called me a faggot like he – " that wasn't important. "He wanted to take Max home, he got real rough with her. I was just – fuckin' sitting there." He couldn't talk again.

"Okay," Hop said. "Did he come at you?"

"No," Billy said. *Because I was just fucking sitting there.* "I dunno. Knocked Harrington around a little. Tried to take Max out and she didn't wanna leave," Billy told him. "He got his hand around her arm."

He wouldn't let her – he wouldn't let her – “ *Fuck*. “Wouldn't let her go, so I made him let her go. Hit him a couple times, he's okay though.” Mostly. Maybe. Fuck he'd hit his dad *so many times*. “He's still in there.”

“Jesus Christ,” was all Hopper said. “Okay. Jesus.”

“You know he always – “ Billy tried; he couldn't say it. “And I never – ”

“That's okay.”

“Couldn't let him take her.”

“That's okay. That's good.”

“Can you get him or not?” Billy asked him.

Hopper didn't answer him for a couple seconds. “Yeah, I can get him,” he said. “I can get him right now if you want.” He paused again. “You're not gonna like it.”

Billy'd figured. “You gonna arrest me?”

“NO, I'M NOT GOING TO FUCKING ARREST – “ Hopper said and then stopped for a long time. “Kid, you are *fucking* killing me,” he said finally; Billy didn't know what that meant. “I can go and get him, but you're not gonna like it.”

“I wasn't – ”

“You wanna put a restraining order out on him, I can do that, I can do that so easy,” Hop said. “I have got so much *shit*, I can go and get him *right now*.”

Billy didn't know what to say. “Okay,” he said.

“You're gonna have to talk, though,” Hopper told him. “You're not gonna like that. Not right now. Tomorrow you're gonna have to come in and give me a statement, you think you can do that?”

Bill knew what he meant, what Hop meant. He meant comin' in and

filling out a police report or some shit. Sitting down and tellin' people what happened and what he'd let happen. He *didn't* like that but he knew what the chief meant. He'd already known. "Okay," Billy said.

"You're gonna have to tell me what he did and you're gonna have to tell me you don't want him nowhere near you, you think you can do that?"

"Okay," Billy said.

"Okay," Hopper said too. "I think you're gonna need to bring Maxine too, I might have to get a picture of her arm. I don't think I'll need too much from her."

"Okay," Billy said.

"Might have to go to court later," Hop told him. "If you think you want to, I dunno how far you wanna take it. You're gonna have to say shit."

God, it was so awful, thinking about it. He'd never wanted to think about it before: telling people about his dad, or the stuff he did, or the way that they'd lived. The way Billy'd lived for so long. There was something embarrassing about it, like you couldn't get your own family to love you or something, like you'd just taken it for so long. He'd just never wanted people to know.

Billy wasn't answering so Hopper spoke again. "Can you do that?"

It took him another couple seconds. "What, fill out a report?"

"Yeah, you're gonna have to talk about him. Just to a couple people," Hopper said like he was placating him. He sounded like he was talkin' to a little baby. "Monday I want you to come down, I can get a restraining order so your dad can't come near you."

"Okay," Bill said.

"You understand what that means?" Hop asked him.

"Sure."

"He can't come near you, all right? He can't come near your sister if she's with you."

Oh. Billy understood. "Okay."

"If you want to press charges or if I can get your stepmother to press charges, we can do that, but it'll take a couple weeks to go through. If you ... " Hopper stopped.

"Okay," Billy said again. He rubbed his face.

"If you can – if you talk, I think it'll be easier for Max and her mom to come forward, I think your stepmom will talk," the chief said. Now he was speakin' in this real deliberate manner; Billy felt like a battered housewife bein' consoled or some shit. "I could put him away for a while, and then you guys wouldn't have to see him anymore. Think you can do that?"

"Just said okay."

There was a long pause; the line fuzzed over and Billy could hear muffled voices, like the chief was talkin' to somebody. "Okay, I can – hold on," he said. There was more muffled talking, then he came back on the line. "I can come and get him right now," Hop told him. "You think he'll stay at your place much longer, or you think he'll move again?"

Jesus Christ it sounded like his dad was a fucking criminal, like a fugitive or some shit. They always said that kinda crap on like *America's Most Wanted*. *Lock your doors because the suspect is moving*. "I dunno, I laid him out pretty good."

Hopper made a weird coughing sound, almost like he was laughing or something. He wouldn't really be laughing about something like that; he'd let Billy watch his goddamn *kid*. "All right, I can see that."

Billy felt real small again. "Do I gotta be there?"

"... No," Hopper said after another long pause. "You don't – gotta be there. You got somewhere you can go?"

"Think so."

"I don't know if I can take him in, if he moves and I can't get him from your place right away, I won't – I want you and your sister to not be at your apartment tonight." Hop smacked his lips audibly. "Can you – "

"She's supposed to go home to her mom's," Billy told him, a little stupidly he guessed.

"Yeah, don't take her home."

"Her mom said – "

"Hey, I don't care what she said," Hop interrupted him. "I seen people like your father before. You got somewhere to go?"

"I guess."

"You can go to, ah, maybe you can go over to Steve's place, or you can go to the Byers' house, or you could – ah, you, you could come over here – "

Jesus God. "We can go to Steve's place," Billy muttered. He was pretty sure.

The line crackled again; it sounded like Hopper was standing up or something. "Okay," the chief said. "That's good, that's – okay. I don't want you guys to go home, or back to your old house tonight. Don't let Max go home, okay? I can talk to her mother."

"Okay," Billy said. "We, uh, gotta eat dinner," he said like a crazy person. "Max left my stove on."

There was this really long pause. "What, you got somethin' in there?"

"No."

"Okay," Hopper said. "Uh, I can go and turn your stove off," he said in a weird voice. "Go take your sister and eat dinner somewhere, I'm gonna call you at Steve's house later."

Billy felt like a fucking moron. "You got Harrington's number?"

"I sure do," Hop said like Billy'd said something hilarious. "Don't worry about it, okay? I'm gonna go right now and get your dad."

"Okay," Billy said again.

There was another long pause and then the line crackled again. "Hey, you did real good, okay, kid?" Hop told him. "Don't worry. Don't worry about it."

Billy didn't know what to say; he didn't really feel like he'd done anything that was good. "Okay," he said again. "Thank you," he said like a moron. He guessed they was done talking so he hung up.

He stood there for a couple seconds more and then he slid the door to the phone booth open again; he wanted to go throw up. He went and sat on the curb instead. He put his face in his hands. Fuck.

A shadow fell over him: it was Steve. "Hey, are you – okay?" he asked. He still sounded weird, and far away even though he was right there.

Billy wondered if maybe Steve was real freaked out now or something. Not like he hadn't seen Billy wailin' on people before but this was so different; it was so much shit. He'd let his dad shove Harrington around, too. Steve asked him, "Who did you call?"

Billy didn't answer – he couldn't. It felt like he'd used up all his energy on the phone or some shit. Now he just felt empty and exhausted.

Max spoke up for him. "He called the police on Neil, Hopper's coming to get him." Billy heard a soft scuffling sound from behind him as she scraped her shoe against the sidewalk.

Jesus God. "You hear the whole fucking thing?" Billy managed. His face was still in his hands; he wasn't even sure if she could make out what he was sayin' now.

"No! Just – I mean, just some of it," Maxine lied. She told Steve, "Billy has to go down to the police station tomorrow, he has to fill out an assault report."

“Jesus.” Harrington sounded really rattled. After a moment he sat down beside Billy on the curb; some rain water from a big puddle splashed up on them. “Okay. Okay. That’s – I mean, that’s, that’s good right?”

Billy took his head out of his hands and looked up in disbelief. He didn’t exactly want to look up but there was the whole disbelief thing. His fuckin’ face was probably all red or some shit too. “Are you – “ he almost said *are you retarded*; he didn’t know how he stopped himself – “are you fucking crazy? No, it’s not fucking good.”

Steve just stared at him with this completely blank expression. He pressed his lips together, looking at Billy, and didn’t say anything. That was okay since Billy figured there wasn’t much *to* say.

“Billy, he was like literally going to kill us!” Max told him loudly; somehow she’d sat down too on his other side. “He just – came into your *apartment*! He wouldn’t leave! What else were you supposed to do?”

“Dunno.” He was starting to feel real shaky now and it was gonna get bad in about two minutes. Everything had happened so fast. His eyes burned; he wondered if he was about to cry or some shit. He *never* cried; if he did it now he might as well go off and die somewhere. He still didn’t really feel like himself, almost like he was floating outside of his body.

Fuck. Fuck. He was starting to feel really bad, and like he’d – made a mistake or something. Jesus God. He didn’t know what he was supposed to have done. He couldn’t believe he’d done it, any of it.

“Don’t worry, Hopper won’t let him do anything to you anymore!” Maxine yapped in her womanly support, too close to his ear. “It’ll be okay!” She sounded like Billy was a fuckin’ battered housewife too.

“No, it ain’t gonna be fuckin’ *okay*,” Billy bit out. It seemed so easy for her. “You don’t – you don’t understand.” She never fucking would.

“Yeah, but he – ”

“You don’t understand *shit*.”

“What the hell are you talking about? *Yes I do!*”

“That's my – that's my fuckin' *dad*, man,” Billy told her; his voice almost cracked like a goddamn baby's. He felt all desperate, like he needed her to know. Steve said, “Hey, Bill, it's not – ” so Billy talked over him.

“That's my fuckin' *dad* and I just called the fuckin' *cops* on him. How the *fuck* is that OKAY?”

“Yeah, WELL, he NEVER ACTS like your dad!” Max told him all loud in her womanly hysteria. “He called you a, a – and he always – he was *hurting* me! He hurts *YOU!* What else were you supposed to do?”

Billy couldn't talk for a second; he felt too crazy. *He hurts YOU!* It didn't matter. He put his head in his hands again. He couldn't figure out what to say. “That's my fuckin' – I don't got shit else, okay?”

He picked his head up again. Max's huge teary face was about six inches away from his, and they just looked at each other. He felt like reaching out and shoving her away; couldn't do it.

He forced himself to speak instead. “That's my fucking – DAD, Max, I don't got shit else! I fuckin' – got nobody! My, my mom's FUCKING DEAD, I just called the goddamn POLICE on him!” he said; maybe he was kinda yelling. “That's all I had, I don't got nobody else.” He was gonna go crazy right out on the street; it felt like he was gonna fuckin' die right there or something.

“That's not *true*, Billy!” Maxine yelped. She grabbed his arm all dramatic. She grabbed his hand too; it hurt. “You can have *me!* And – and my mom! You have *us!* We're your family!”

Billy couldn't say anything; he might explode if he did. His throat worked, frozen, as he tried to answer. He wanted to put his head back in his hands but since Max was still clingin' to him he couldn't really do that. He wanted to laugh too but he couldn't seem to do that either. It felt like he kept sniffing for some reason, and his throat hurt from screamin' in his dad's face. He just looked at her.

“Okay,” he managed to say after a long time.

Max patted his hand all reassuring like he was a little kid. Steve said, “Uh, I – you can have me too.”

Jesus Christ Billy wanted to fucking cry or something; he couldn't look at him. He still wanted to go and die somewhere, and his chest hurt real bad. “That ain't the same thing. You ain't my fucking family.”

Steve didn't say anything for a couple moments. He was just sitting there on the curb and looking at Billy. “That's okay,” he said finally. “You can still have me, if you want.”

Billy snorted. Maybe he kinda sniffled. He couldn't tell if he was actually cryin' or something; there was too much rain on his face. He didn't think he was crying. “Okay,” he said again.

Steve put his arm around him so Billy leaned on his shoulder. Maxine was still holdin' his hand and they probably looked all like they was in a soap opera. He was surprised that no cars passing by fuckin' honked at them or something.

They sat like that for a couple minutes, not talking. Billy felt real bad and then he started to feel okay again. He rubbed the side of his face, hard, with the hand that Max wasn't clinging to. Finally Steve said like a nerd, “Hey, uh, thanks for calling me your fucking boyfriend.”

“Oh, my god, *REALLY*, STEVE?” Maxine went off on him in two seconds.

“What, what, I was just saying – ”

“Is it *really* the time to talk about your relationship?”

“I'm NOT talking about my relationship, I said one thing – ”

“Um, *okay*, but Billy's upset right now – ”

Jesus God. Billy rubbed his face again, for a while. “I'm okay,” he said.

Finally they got up off the curb and walked on down the street to Harrington's car. It seemed to take a long time. Maxine was still holding Billy's hand like he was her goddamn toddler; she held onto him for the whole walk down the block. When they reached the car she looked around and asked if they should go to the diner or something.

Billy wasn't talking again so Steve vetoed that idea. Maxine finally let Billy go so's that he could open up his door. As they got into the car, two police Jeeps drove by with their lights on, speeding fast. Everyone got even quieter again as they watched the cars turn left down Clearfield.

"Okay," Steve said finally; his voiced seemed way too loud. "Yeah, uh – okay, right. We, we can just go to my place, is that okay?"

Billy didn't answer him. Max said, "Sure."

He really didn't remember most of the drive to Harrington's house but nobody really talked too much again. Billy noticed for the first time that his right arm was bleeding – there was glass in it, not too much. He picked a little shard out and watched some blood leak out onto his jeans in this sluggish drizzle; it didn't look real. He put his arm in his lap and tried not to bleed onto Harrington's fancy seats.

"Oh, shit," Steve said suddenly. Billy looked up to tell him it was fine but Steve was squinting out at the street. Max's friend Beverly was standin' by the stoplight on the corner of Main Street, getting rained on and waving at them.

Harrington had no choice but to stop at the red light and let Bev troop over to the car. She had her baggy cargo shorts on and a huge bluejean backpack hanging over one shoulder. Max rolled her window down and Bev slung her arms over it.

"Hey! I was just walking over to your brother's, do you still want to go – " she paused, taking all three of them in: Max with her blotchy face and still wearin' her Tweety Bird pajamas bottoms, Steve with his wide eyes and Billy's arm bleedin' everywhere – "holys~~hit~~," she breathed, leaning into the car. "What the hell happened to you guys?"

"Billy's asshole dad tried to beat us all up, the police are at his place!" Maxine told her.

There was this long pause. "Holy *shit*," Bev said again. "Are you *okay*?"

"I – I – don't – know!" Max sounded kinda weepy again; Billy still couldn't say anything.

The girls started fussin' at each other through the backseat window. Their voices got all high; it was worse than *General Hospital*. "Are you *okay*, can you – I don't know, can you come to my house?" Bev was asking Max.

"Uh, yeah, no, she, she can't, she's gotta stay with Bill right now," Steve said. Billy was pretty sure he was in full-on den dad mode by now.

"She's upset!"

"No shit she's upset!" Steve told her all agitated.

"Do you think Bev could come to your place too?" Maxine asked him in a trembling voice; she was really starting to blubber again.

"I, uh, I don't really – think that's a good idea – " Harrington sounded real overwhelmed and it made Billy feel like total shit. He'd help him out if he could ever fuckin' talk again.

Someone from behind them beeped their horn; the light had turned green again. Steve jerked forward in his seat like a crazy person. "Fuck, I don't – okay, just, just hurry up and get in the goddamn car." Bev jumped in and the girls started whisperin' away to each other in the backseat.

"Billy, are you *okay*?" Bev asked him from a million miles away.

Billy couldn't answer her – it felt like he didn't know what he was doing; it felt pretty bad. It still kind of felt like he was making a mistake or something, and he was trying to think of ways he could take it back. Except he wasn't really going to take it back. He knew that – he guessed after everything he knew that. Maxine started

blubberin' away again so Billy didn't have to say anything.

Somehow they got to Harrington's place and somehow they all got inside. It felt crazy-weird to be inside of Steve's big empty house even though there were four of them now; it felt even emptier than usual. Steve dragged the dogs out back and Billy just stood in the hallway like a moron with Max clingin' to him again and Bev staring at him.

Steve seemed less freaked out now that he was in his own home at least. He took charge and led them all into the kitchen. Billy still didn't know what to do so he sat down at the table; it felt like his legs were gonna give out otherwise. Steve stared at him and the girls looked around at both of them.

"What do you guys want to do, do you wanna eat or something?" Steve asked finally.

Nobody answered him. Finally Max said, "I guess," and joined him at the counter.

Billy guessed she was okay now. He wished he could calm himself the fuck down too.

Harrington started banging around some pots and pans, gearing up to make them all some food, and Bev came over to the table to inspect Billy's arm. Her mouth twisted up as she squinted at Billy's wrist. "Do you have, like, peroxide or tape or anything?" she asked Steve, looking over. "His whole hand is fucked up."

"Oh, shit, I didn't – uh, yeah, sorry, in the, the bathroom. Down the hall. I can –"

"I'm good," Billy told him; Bev went off to get the first aid kit anyway.

Steve collapsed in the kitchen chair beside Billy to patch his arm up. Beverly sat perched up on the table handing him gauze and alcohol swabs and shit; Maxine had taken over at the stove.

"Sorry, God, I wasn't even thinkin' about your arm," Steve said to him. He was holding Billy's wrist and frowning at the long scrape down his forearm.

"Doesn't hurt," Billy said; Steve frowned at him even more for some reason. Billy didn't know what the hell he was supposed to be sayin'.

Steve wasn't exactly the most gentle person but Billy could tell he was trying to be careful. He cleaned off the big cut on Billy's forearm and spent a lot of time swiping Billy's knuckles with peroxide; he said he wanted to make sure there wasn't any little bits of glass stuck in them or anything. He kept staring at Billy in this real intense way, like they was having some big conversation or something.

Billy kept his head down and looked at the tabletop. It wasn't the first time that someone real cute with big brown eyes had been staring at him and patching him up; he kinda wanted to cry again or something.

"How the hell did you get *glass* in your hand?" Bev asked him. She was dripping rain water everywhere too – she was probably ruining Harrington's expensive kitchen table. Her wet red hair was so dark that it looked brown, plastered against her pale neck.

Billy licked his lips and found he could finally talk again. "Went through the coffee table," he told her.

"Oh, *shit!*" Bev said real upset. She frowned hugely; was almost funny. "I really liked that table."

"Me too."

"We can just get you a new one," Harrington said in a weird voice.

"Your dad's really crazy." She handed Steve another alcohol wipe. "I mean, *shit*. Almost as bad my dad, I think. I smashed his face with our toilet tank once."

Billy was pretty sure it was worse for girls, anyway. "I ain't know you lived with your dad."

She didn't answer him for a while; she watched Steve turn Billy's wrist over. "He's back in Maine," she said finally. "Okay, ready for band aids?" She made a face into the first-aid kit. "Um, why do you got these?" she asked like a little kid, squinting.

“Dustin thinks he's too fuckin' funny,” Steve said. He looked at Billy again. “You want Elmo or Big Bird?”

Jesus God. “Big Bird,” Billy said; Harrington smiled at him for some reason. He gave Billy four band aids.

“You wanna eat something?” Steve asked him.

“I guess.”

Maxine had made them some spaghetti but it turned out that nobody could really eat after all. They sat around the table with their plates, looking at each other and not sayin' too much. Max was twirling her fork around in her bowl and it kept making a scraping noise.

“These plates are really nice,” she commented blankly, like they hadn't eaten over at Steve's house a couple dozen times before.

“Thanks, my mom bought them,” Harrington said back like a goddamn stud. He was holding his glass of water but not drinking it, tilting it from side to side. He wasn't really eatin' neither.

After about ten minutes of nobody eating and Max's fork clinking away, Harrington got up and started takin' their plates away. “Yeah, this is not – I can order you guys somethin' later if you want,” he told Max. “You should really, uh, call your mom.”

“Oh *shit!*” Max yelped; her eyes got big. “Okay, yeah – I mean, you're right.”

Steve got her the phone from over on the counter and Billy watched her punch the number in and put the receiver up to her ear. After a couple seconds she made a face and hung up. “The line's busy.”

“Call her again,” Steve said; Max looked up at him. “She's probably, uh, tryin' to figure out where the hell you are.”

“Oh. Right.” She dialed again and Billy guessed that this time Sue picked up; Max started talking. “Mom! It's me, I'm – “ Her eyes widened again. “What? No no, I'm okay! I'm not there anymore! It's – I'm *fine*, don't worry. I'M FINE! I was ... yeah. Yeah, I know.”

She pushed herself away from the table and drew her feet up onto the chair; her wet Converse squeaked. “Hopper called Mom already,” she told Steve and Billy, glancing over. Her brows dipped down. “What?” she said into the phone. “No, I’m – fine! Billy said that Hopper said – no, I’m, I’m at Steve’s house!”

Max was quiet for a moment, listening to her moms. “Of course Billy’s here, where else would he be! I know! I *know* he didn’t do anything! No, it was all that *asshole* – sorry! He just came in and ... ” Her eyes flicked over Steve and Billy – “went crazy. No, I don’t know. Yes! Yes, he did! He was grabbing me! He pushed Steve too, *and* Billy!”

She started crying again and turning red; it was real awful. Steve and Billy and Beverly all stared at her.

Max ignored them and hunched over, holding the phone. She was still crying. “I know. *I know*,” she said into the phone. “I’m – fine! No, they weren’t – even – doing anything, they were – watching TV!” Her voice was gettin’ all funny since she was cryin’. “No. *No*, I don’t know! What do you – think? So *what*? It’s Billy apartment, he can – ” She made her fishface. “I know that! Okay, I *know* you didn’t say that. Oh, my g – okay! Hopper said we’re not supposed to come home, did he get – ? No, he’s ... yeah, Billy’s right here! I don’t know. I don’t KNOW! He’s okay, I think. *Why*, what are you going to – ”

She cut herself off abruptly and looked over again. “Mom wants to talk to you,” she said, holding the phone out; Billy froze up staring at her.

Max looked back at him for a long time, waiting. Finally she put the phone back to her ear. “I don’t think he ... can talk right now,” she said in a strangled voice. “I don’t know, I guess. Uh, *yeah*, he’s upset! Gee! Why do *you* think?”

“Hey, Max,” Steve said; she sounded all nasty.

Max rolled her eyes at him and quirked her head to the side so that the phone was restin’ between her ear and her shoulder. She huffed out a breath and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Sorry, Mom. He’s okay,” she said again. She made a face. “No, he – just his dad!” She made a bigger face. “Uh, I know! Yeah, because he was *hurting*

me! I told you – okay, I know!” She was quiet for a long time again. “No, Hopper said not to! What? I know. Um, because I want to stay with *Billy!*”

Billy suddenly really didn't want to be in the kitchen anymore. He didn't wanna hear Max talkin' about him or hear what she'd say. He didn't wanna hear what Susan had to say about him either. He felt real dizzy again; he got up and wandered back into the front hallway. For a moment he just stood there, holding onto the doorframe, then he went and sat down on the steps.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there. Maybe for a while, but maybe it was just a couple of minutes. It felt like a long time though.

He looked at the rain coming down outside of the big front window, the patterns that it made on the glass through the fancy silk curtain. His heart felt like it was too big for his body, pumping too much blood through his veins. It kinda felt like he was gonna explode again or something. It was hard to keep breathing, as if his throat was caught in a vise grip.

Billy could hear Max out in the kitchen talking to her moms still, then Harrington and Max and Bev all talking too, but it was like he couldn't make out the words. He could *hear* 'em but he couldn't really understand 'em, was like listening to someone on a real blown-out phone connection, or when you was watchin' those old *Peanuts* cartoons and the grownups were going on with their made-up sounds.

He was pretty sure Max and Bev and Steve were sayin' actual words though. Maybe he was going nuts or something.

Even more time passed and then after a while longer Steve came out of the kitchen and stood lookin' at him. He looked pretty screwed up too and Billy felt bad. He didn't look hurt or nothing, but his face was still all pale and his t-shirt was wet and dirty, pretty hair was all tousled from the rain too.

Steve walked over and sat down on the steps next to Billy. He ran his hands through his hair a few times, combing it back from his face. “Are you all right?” he asked finally; Billy felt kinda surprised that he

could understand the words that Steve was sayin'. Probably would be weird to tell him that shit though. Steve put his hand on Billy's arm for a second, then took it away.

"Sure," Billy said. He was sayin' actual words too, and he was almost sure he hadn't flinched. Mostly he was just trying to keep breathing, he guessed.

"So ... uh, Max's off the phone now, I had to get on the line and talk to her mom," Steve told him.

Jesus Christ. Billy felt like a fucking little kid or something, gettin' Harrington to talk to his stepmom for him. "You serious?"

"She just, yeah – wanted to make sure it was cool that Max stayed here or whatever, I told her it was fine. She wanted to know what was goin' on," Steve told him. "She's not, uh, she's not mad or anything. I guess she ... has to go down to the police station and see your dad."

That was so great, it was so wonderful. Sue was gonna go and see his dad and his dad was gonna tell her all about what a fucking goddamn faggot Billy was. Billy'd just wanted to get Max away from his old man but Sue probably wasn't gonna let Max get anywhere near him either after this.

He hadn't really thought about it before, how Susan might act if she found out about him being queer or whatever. It wasn't like he and Steve had even gotten caught doin' something but she was gonna know now; his dad knew and so she was gonna know. Sue'd never really seemed to talk about that kinda stuff much but everybody had a fuckin' opinion, Billy guessed. He remembered Maxine making her little jokes about him and Harrington before and how Susan had swatted at her and told her to quit it. *Steve is such a nice boy*. Billy guessed maybe she wouldn't think either of them were so nice after tonight.

"She's gonna find out about us," he told Harrington.

Steve got a real funny look on his face: he got the frown-wrinkle between his eyebrows and his mouth twisted to the side for a

moment. “Uh, Bill, I think she already ... ” He stopped and then just looked at Billy. “You know, not – not everybody cares about that stuff.”

“I guess.”

“She just wanted to talk to you, you know, she wasn't mad,” Steve told him again. Billy *didn't* know; he didn't say anything and Steve kept looking at him. “Are you all right?” he asked a second time.

“Sure,” Billy said again. He wondered if they were just gonna keep saying the same goddamn sentences to each other over and over like in a rehearsal, or if he was havin' a stroke or something. He felt real shaky again so he wrapped his arms around his knees and then laid his head down on top of them. Steve touched his back, for a couple of minutes.

He just kept on sitting there too. Billy didn't know how long they sat there, but he could feel Steve being awkward as hell beside him, fidgeting away. He was probably chewin' on his nails like a kid. After a long time Steve said, “Do you ... need me to do something?” Billy didn't say anything so they sat there some more. He was okay if he could just keep breathing; he didn't need to do this shit here again. Steve said, “I – yeah, you're kind of freaking me out here, Bill.”

“Sorry,” Billy said into his arms. He still didn't really know what the hell he was supposed to be doing; he didn't think he was being particularly freaky or anything. He was just sittin' there.

“I just ... don't know what I'm supposed to do,” Steve said; Billy didn't know either so he didn't answer him. “I'll, uh ... I'm just gonna – hey, I'll be right back, okay?”

Harrington got up and went away for a while, for a long time. Bev came out for a couple minutes and sat down on the steps with Billy and then Max did too; he guessed it was Check Up On Billy hour. He told both the girls he was okay and got 'em to go away. Max said her moms wasn't mad too. She seemed okay now, told him that she and Bev were gonna watch *Unsolved Mysteries* in the den if Billy wanted to watch it too. That was on way later but whatever. Billy said okay and then didn't get up again.

Finally Steve came back and stood there looking at him some more. Billy felt almost normal by now and was able to sit up again. "Hey," he said. He tried to sound like a normal person who wasn't freakin' out or being freaky or whatever.

"Hey," Steve said back. He still looked weirded out and was holding a bunch of clothes all folded up; Billy guessed he'd been downstairs in the basement or something. "Sorry, I – gotta go upstairs. Can you come with me?" he asked like he was talkin' to a kid.

"Okay." Billy followed him up the stairs.

They just stood in Harrington's room starin' at each other, was like their favorite pastime. Steve put his clothes down on top of his dresser. "Do you wanna take a shower or something?" he asked Billy. "I always, uh, feel better after I do that."

Billy wondered if Steve was trying to hint about something. He didn't think he really smelled or whatever. Then again Harrington had made his little comment earlier when they'd gotten up. "Okay," he said again. Steve gave him a towel so he went on into the bathroom.

Billy had showered over at Steve's place a couple times but it was still kind of strange to be in his big glamorous bathroom or whatever. Harrington had his own bathroom and it was connected to his room like in a goddamn mansion. The shower curtain was fancy – it had a vinyl part and a cloth part; the cloth part was checkered and orange, matched the walls in here and in Steve's bedroom.

Just Harrington's frickin' bathroom was about as big as Maxine's cramped little room at Neil and Susan's place; Billy couldn't imagine growing up like this. It was Steve and all and Billy loved Steve so he wasn't exactly jealous or nothing. But he just couldn't imagine it. It made him feel weird, lookin' around now, like he didn't belong here.

He stood there looking around the fancy bathroom for a while. He was trying hard not to think about anything. Lights in here were too bright; he turned the shower on but then didn't get in.

Another wave of dizziness overtook him – it felt like it'd never stop – so he went and leaned with his arms braced against the sink for a

couple minutes. He was starting to feel real sick and overwhelmed again, and he kept picturing his dad's face, how mad he'd looked, how sick. It made his insides feel all twisted, like he was gettin' nauseous or something. His stomach actually hurt, too, this dull pain low in his chest, and suddenly he was pretty sure he was about to throw up.

Then he *did* throw up and it was bad; he wasn't even sure how he made it to the toilet. He threw up for a long time. He threw his breakfast up and even some of his dinner from last night, then he just gagged and heaved for a while.

Puking was still the fucking worst – Billy hadn't thrown up since he'd gotten sick way back in the springtime. Even just *thinking* about throwing up always made him feel sick, so whenever it happened it was always such a great time.

He felt like a fuckin' baby or a little kid or something. He spent a while cleanin' up the bathroom where he'd thrown up, didn't want to leave that for Harrington. He found the stupid blue toothbrush Steve always left out from him; it was in the drawer underneath the sink. He brushed his teeth until his mouth bled, spat in the sink. Cleaned that up too. His stomach still hurt but not really in a puking way anymore, he guessed.

The shower was still running so Billy undressed himself and got in finally. He stayed in there for a long time, drained, until the hot water gave out, then he stood around some more, letting the water run cold and then icy, biting into his back and making his neck feel stiff. He was gettin' his stupid band-aids all messed up; Harrington was gonna bitch at him.

He felt real tired and the light was still too bright. It was like this big struggle to push the curtain back and get out. Once he was done with all that, he toweled off and put his jeans back on. No shirt, though, since he was pretty sure he'd fucking thrown up on that. It was so great.

Harrington's bedroom was still dark when Billy finally left the bathroom – just the little lamp by the bed was on. Steve was sittin' Indian-style on the bed, as if he was waiting for Billy or something.

His hair was all wet and he had a little white t-shirt and some dorky plaid pajama pants on.

He glanced up when Billy walked in, and – shit. It was real dumb but he looked so fucking ... pretty or so good or something, just sitting there, like he looked like somebody you would wanna come home to. Billy just stood there staring at him for a minute. It almost made his insides hurt real bad for a second, like his chest was squeezing together too tight; he didn't know why.

Steve looked Billy up and down, not in a sexy way. “Uh, do you want pajamas or anything?” he asked him.

Billy felt like a dodo in his Garbage Pail Kid jeans. Obviously he hadn't thought to bring any clothes over or whatever. “I'm okay.”

“Okay.” Steve watched as Billy came over to the bed and sat down next to him. Even though he looked nice, he still had one of his weird expressions on; Billy didn't know what it was. “Did you – throw up?” Steve asked him in a stilted voice.

Jesus God. Billy briefly considered launching himself out the window – he could make it across the bed if Harrington didn't grab him, he thought. “Yeah, sorry.”

“No, I – that's, Jesus, that's okay.” Steve rolled his eyes which really Billy didn't think was very nice. “I, uh, I took another shower in the guest room, we were like right next to each other. I could ... hear you, I was – worried about you. I was about to come in.”

That was so great, too. Billy guessed he'd thought Harrington's ritzy house would be like super soundproof or whatever. He was glad he hadn't fucking cried or screamed like a dramatic bitch in a movie. “I'm good now.”

Steve was still lookin' at him too much and he still looked kinda weird or freaked out or nervous. He twisted his hands in his lap. “I, so – Hopper called for you a while ago, I talked to him too.”

“Sorry. I ain't mean to make you take all my calls.”

“That's okay. It's not, uh, a big deal. He just said for you to come in

tomorrow, you know, whenever you can.”

“Okay.” Billy had work, of course, but he'd have to talk to Hank. Shit. He didn't even know what he was gonna tell him. The truth he guessed. God. Fuck. He couldn't really tell Hank all of it.

They sat there next to each other on the bed for a couple seconds; Steve had his hands folded in his lap. He looked over at Billy again; his fucking eyes were so big. “Do you want me to go away?” he asked finally.

Billy didn't really understand what he meant. “It's your room,” he told Harrington.

“Yeah, but I don't have to – you know, be in here if you wanna sleep or something. I can stay in the guest room.”

Billy stared at him too. He wondered if he was actin' real cold or mean or something; that wasn't what he was trying to do. Or maybe Harrington just wanted to not be around Billy right now; maybe he was real freaked out. Billy really wanted Steve to be around him, though. “That's okay. What's it, like six o'clock?”

Steve kind of laughed; his shoulders did this jerking motion. “Uh ... no,” he said slowly. “Man, it's, it's late, it's almost ten or whatever.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, you were ... “ he stopped. “Uh, you were kinda just sittin' there downstairs for a long time, I thought you were, I don't know. I, I called my mom, I didn't really know what to do. She told me to just leave you alone. I thought you were, like, in a, a fugitive state or something.”

Billy licked his lips slowly and tried not to say anything. “Fugue state,” he corrected anyway.

“What? Sure, right, that's what I said,” Steve said right away. He sounded real embarrassed; it was so cute or whatever.

Billy almost felt normal for a second. He had no clue how Steve managed to make him feel that way; it was totally weird.

He looked at his hands too. "What you tell your mom?" he asked finally.

"What, nothing," Steve lied. "I just – yeah, I just told her you and Max were here, I just told her about your – dad and all." That meant that Harrington'd probably told his mom that Billy'd let his old man kick the shit out of him for his whole life; Billy didn't say anything. After a moment, Steve continued: "I didn't really ... say anything about you and me, don't worry."

"Okay."

"Uh. Okay." They just sat there some more. "Do you want me to go?" Steve asked him again. "You can sleep in here, it doesn't matter."

He was making Billy weird as shit; this was Steve's fucking room. Billy almost felt or hurt something even though that was totally dumb. Steve had said *Uh, you can have me too* so Billy didn't know why he wanted to go so bad. "Do you not want me to be in here or somethin'?"

"What?" Harrington's eyebrows went down and he got the huge frown-wrinkle between his eyes; that was an expression Billy knew at least. "No, I mean, of course I do. I just, I don't know what I'm supposed to do right now. You usually don't – uh, you don't – " he pursed his lips and then spoke carefully: "usually don't seem to want people around when you're upset."

"I'm not upset," Billy told him; Steve didn't answer. "I don't want you to go."

"Okay. Are you – okay now?"

"Sure."

"Really?" Steve was still staring at him; he'd been staring the whole time actually. He reached over and touched Billy's arm. "Uh, do you wanna – talk or something? We don't have to."

Billy thought about it; he still felt kinda sick he guessed. It was almost ten or whatever so maybe it was okay to feel tired. "Don't really got much else to say."

“Okay.”

“Why, you wanna talk about it?”

“Nope!” Steve said right away again. “I don't, uh, yeah, I'm good with, uh, never talking about today.”

Billy hadn't really thought it'd been that bad for him or anything. He didn't wanna freak Harrington out any more than he already was. “Okay.”

They settled down on Steve's little bed and just laid there staring at each other. Billy still felt fucking stupid, and he still didn't know what to say. Steve put his arm around him and stared some more. “What do you wanna do? Wanna sleep?”

Billy chewed on his lower lip. “Where's Max at?”

“Oh, yeah, I got them set up downstairs, I said you were okay. They decided they wanted to go swimming in the pool in their underwear, I felt like a huge perv so I just came back up here,” Steve told him.

Maxine was such a piece of fucking work. “Sorry 'bout her.”

“You – no, that's fine, I want you guys here.” Steve was lookin' at him with his brown eyes all big and he was running his hand through Billy's hair, kind of clumsy. “Is this okay?”

“Sure.” Billy thought about it; he leaned over and kissed him. He wasn't sure if Steve would but he kissed Billy back. That was kind of clumsy too – it felt strange to be on Steve's little bed. Steve shifted over closer to him; his hand was really tight in Billy's hair.

“You scared me earlier, man,” Steve told him. “I didn't know what to do.” He kissed Billy again, on Billy's mouth and the side of his face. Steve always tasted so good; Billy almost couldn't answer. He hoped that he didn't taste like puke or something.

“Sorry.”

“No, that's fine, I just, uh ... “ Steve trailed off and kissed him again; kind of uncertainly. He pulled back and looked at Billy with his big

doe eyes. "I didn't know if you were okay."

"I'm good now."

"Okay." Steve kissed him some more and wiggled over closer. "You smell good, did you get a new soap?" he asked like a little dork.

Jesus God. "Hawked it offa some pretty rich boy," Billy said back like a nerd anyway; Steve grinned against his mouth. They kissed again and Billy slid a hand across Steve's hip, got it up under his shirt. He pulled him a little closer so's they were touching more and kissed him again. Harrington could get him going in about a minute no matter what it seemed.

Steve laughed at him; he let himself be pulled. "Oh yeah? Is that, ah, what you wanna do?"

"Sure is," Billy said.

"Okay."

They just kissed and touched each other for a while; Billy wasn't really sure what all he wanted to do. He was starting to feel okay again, though, finally. He felt okay at Steve's place. He was with Steve and he wanted Steve; he loved Steve so he'd do whatever Steve wanted to do. Billy wanted him but he didn't know what all he wanted to do. He felt Steve's mouth open against his and kissed him harder; he tried to put everything he had into it.

Even still, he could hear his dad's voice in his head saying *I knew you were doing some perverted shit over here*, the awful way his father's face had twisted up. *That's beautiful, you fucking faggot*. The memory of it tasted like the bile in the back of his throat had, making Billy feel sick. He pushed it down and kissed Steve some more; he didn't want to feel that way.

He didn't think it was perverted. It didn't feel perverted or sick or whatever. He thought about Steve's eyes on him when they'd get each other undressed, the way he'd pull Billy really close when they were kissing, just like now. He thought about the way Steve's fingers had felt inside him last night, spreading him open, making him open.

Steve had said *Is that okay? Is that good?* and Billy'd said *yes* and *yes*; Harrington had even got him on his hands and knees like a fucking dog.

It hadn't make him feel like a dog; it felt good. Steve had been fingering him and touching him about everywhere. With the way he'd had Billy spread out on the bed, Billy couldn't even really touch him back, but that hadn't seemed to matter. Steve had pushed Billy's hand away. *Just let me do you.* Nobody had really done that before, like worked really hard to make him feel good or whatever. Steve had said *Do you like that? Do you want more?*

It did feel good and Billy liked it and he wanted more. If it felt good, and he liked it, and Steve liked it, Billy didn't see how it could be wrong or bad or whatever. It wasn't for nobody else. It was good and they wanted each other; Billy definitely didn't need to be thinking about his fucking dad right now.

He still felt kinda dizzy even now, so he was kinda glad they were just kissing or whatever so far. Sometimes it was nice to just do that; he still wasn't sure what all he wanted right now. He pulled at Steve's little t-shirt until he took it off.

Steve ran a hand over Billy's arm and touched his chest. He mouthed his way down Billy's jaw and spent a while kissing his neck, too. He put his hand on Billy's jeans so Billy shifted around too and helped him get them open. "Okay?" Steve asked.

It was more than okay. "Uh-huh."

Steve kissed him again and wrapped a hand around Billy's cock; Billy arched up into his touch. Their mouths met again, for a long time, and he put both hands in Steve's hair. They moved around on the bed as Steve jerked him off, real slow. It felt really good. "I love getting to touch you like this," Harrington told him like some big romantic.

Billy tried to say some nice shit back and suddenly found that he couldn't; it should be easy. His face got really hot and Steve's tongue in his mouth felt like it was choking him.

He tried to speak again; his throat was lockin' up or something. He

burst into tears instead.

Steve jerked away like Billy'd burned him and sat up a little. His eyes went real big. "Oh, *shit*, what, what happened?" he said all alarmed; Billy cried even more. "Oh, my god, Billy, I, uh – I'm sorry, I didn't – "

"Sorry," Billy managed, still crying. He wanted to curl up and die somewhere. He actually hadn't even been sure if he *could* cry anymore; apparently he still could. It was so fuckin' awful. The side of his face felt hot and it hurt where his dad had hit him earlier.

"You – uh, no, Bill, that's ... that's okay – " Steve stuttered out; he took his hand off of Billy's cock too and moved away a little more. "God, sorry, I don't – "

Billy felt like a fucking moron, and he was still cryin'. "Sorry," he croaked out again. His tears were getting in his fucking mouth already; they tasted salty.

"What's, what's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothin'. I dunno." Jesus God it was so terrible – he felt so embarrassed. He was pretty sure there was snot coming out of his nose, and Harrington was way too close to him.

Steve flopped back down and started rubbing at Billy's shoulder; he was *still* way too close. "Jesus, I'm sorry." He sounded really overwhelmed again and Billy felt like total fucking shit. "We, yeah, we don't have to do that right now, I'm really sorry."

"Can still hook up, I just need like a minute." Billy was still crying, but he was still hard, too. He could do it if Steve wanted. He still wanted to do it; he didn't know what the fuck was wrong with him. He was fucking it all up, and the day had already been so goddamn terrible. "I can – "

"Uh, NOPE," Steve said all loud in his face like a crazy person. "Nope, weird thing, this's actually kind of a mood-killer, I don't want you to – "

"I still want to."

Billy couldn't really see too much on account of all his fuckin' blubbering but Steve looked like his goddamn eyes were about to pop out of his head. "Oh, my fucking god, Billy,*no*, that's not what I, I meant." He put Billy's dick back in his jeans and put his arms around him again. He didn't seem like he'd be letting go anytime soon so Billy laid his head against Steve's collarbone and cried some more.

He didn't exactly fucking *want* to lay on Steve and cry – really, that was about the last goddamn thing he wanted to be doing – but that was what was happening now. It was better than Harrington fuckin' staring at him while he did it, he guessed. Even so it was fucking awful: he hadn't cried in front of anybody since before his mom had died, he didn't think, not even Maxine, not even after his old man had thrown him down the steps, or when he'd wail on Billy real bad in front of her. Hadn't even ever cried in front of fuckin' Tracey, even during one of his baby-ass panic attacks or whatever.

It was so goddamn embarrassing; it was so awful. He was tryin' to be quiet but it wasn't exactly working. His breath kept hitching in his throat and his nose was getting all stuffed up. He was pretty sure his face was bright red.

Steve shifted over and moved one of his arms up to wrap it around Billy's shoulder. "I, uh, I don't – I'm really sorry, that's my fault. We, yeah, we don't have to do that right now, I thought you'd want – sorry, sorry for cursing at you."

"S'okay," Billy managed. It was so fucking awful. He could barely talk; he was pretty sure he was like snotting and snorting and spitting all over Harrington too like a fuckin' monster. Steve just kept his arms around him though.

Billy cried for a while – it was like he couldn't stop. He tried not to make too much noise or whatever. There was something wrong with him: he couldn't seem to make himself sit up and move away, walk over to the bathroom or something, anything so that Harrington wouldn't have to see him acting like this. He felt like a fuckin' robot that had gotten powered down or some shit, or like a kid's toy that'd lost its battery. He didn't even know if he felt upset or what. He just cried for a while.

Steve kept his arms around him the whole time which was terrible and he kept saying terrible shit like, "Bill, you're gonna be fine," and "Hey, it's all right." He didn't even sound pissed off or whatever that they'd been going to hook up and then Billy'd just ended up blubberin' on him instead.

"Can you – quit – fuckin' – sayin' shit?" Billy asked him, still crying.

"Oh, uh. Right. Right, right, right. Sorry, I – uh, okay, I'm done, I won't say anything else." Steve kept holdin' onto him and Billy wanted to curl up and die.

God it was so fucking awful. Billy felt super embarrassed again, or, shit – whatever it was that was, like, *worse* than embarrassed. Ashamed maybe. He couldn't stop sniffing and his face and his neck felt hot and his shoulders and his chest kept shaking and heaving. He probably looked like a little bitch or something; Jesus God he didn't want to think about what he looked like with Steve lookin' back at him. It was shitty because he'd never wanted Steve to see him like this or whatever. Steve'd seen him like practically everything else but that wasn't exactly a comforting thought.

"Man, you're okay," Steve told him again; he'd gone almost three minutes without talking, it seemed. Billy didn't know how long it'd been. They were just laying there facing each other on the bed, pressed real close together, and Steve squeezed him like he wanted to hug him or some shit. "You're, it's fine, you're okay now."

"Dunno what's wrong with me."

Steve was touchin' the back of Billy's neck. Billy's wet hair was getting all tangled up around his stupid necklace; he couldn't imagine how great he looked. Steve unwound the necklace and pulled back a little to look at him again.

"Gee, well, you kinda had a big day," he said in this dry voice, almost like he was tryin' to tease Billy, not in a bad way. Just him sounding that way made Billy feel even shakier, like Steve must feel bad for him or something.

Steve shifted over some more and brushed Billy's hair away from his

forehead; he kept on, like, *caressing* Billy's face like Billy was a little kid or a dog. "It's, you know, it's okay to be upset or whatever."

Billy didn't even know if he was upset or what. He didn't know what he was. "I just can't – " he couldn't even finish.

"That's okay," Steve told him. He just kept on leaning over and kind of petting Billy; he started rubbing his back in these slow circles. Billy guessed that felt nice. "I'm – I'm sorry, Bill, I don't really – what, what should I do?"

"Don't have to do nothing." Billy sniffled and snotted some more against Steve's shoulder. He didn't know how Harrington wasn't like going crazy humpin' him right now or whatever. "Fuck. Sorry. I can't – " his voice almost cracked; he felt like Wheeler Jr seein' a girl for the first time. "I, I just need like a minute." It'd probably been like ten already and he still couldn't fucking calm down. "Sorry."

"Hey, come on, you're fine, it's, it's fine," Steve told him, kind of desperately. "It doesn't matter. Hey, you know, I, I, I love you and all, it's okay."

Jesus Christ. Billy cried even harder. "You can't – fucking – say that to me when I'm – crying, you *asshole*," he managed.

"Sure I can, I, uh, I want you to be okay!" Steve said all loud like a nutcase. He flopped back down and put his hand in Billy's hair again.

That was fine and all but it really wasn't the way Billy wanted to hear it; it wasn't the way he wanted Harrington to mean it. He wanted Harrington to say that he loved him because he was, like, all overwhelmed by how hot Billy was or how great Billy was, and he just *had* to say it, not because Billy was crying like a little bitch on his bed and Steve wanted him to fucking *feel better*. It didn't make Billy feel better; it made him feel kind of miserable really. Almost ashamed again or something. "Yeah, that's great."

"Come on, Bill, that's not what – I, uh, I really mean it and all, I just – "

"Can you not do this shit right now?" Billy begged him. Harrington

was making him feel so goddamn stupid; he was gonna die in another minute.

“Okay. Okay, I’m sorry.” Steve kept on staring at him. He looked so fucking sad or whatever and it made Billy feel like total crap. “Man, I’m so sorry, I just don’t know what to do right now.”

“Don’t have to do anything,” Billy told him again; it was still so hard to talk.

“Okay.” They laid there and Billy cried some more; basically he cried until he almost wanted to pass out. Every time he thought he’d stop more tears would leak out – he wondered if he was havin’ a breakdown or something. He guessed that whatever he’d felt breaking inside of him earlier had just turned him into a fucking pussy. They laid there for a long time and the room was real quiet. Every now and again they could hear a shriek or a big splash outside; Billy guessed that Beverly had gotten Max all nice and cheered up or whatever.

He guessed he could understand that. It was easier to feel better after some bad shit had happened when you had somebody with you. He knew that he usually felt good around Steve; it was easier to act okay when he was around Harrington. He guessed maybe that’d been what he’d wanted to do earlier when he and Steve had started to hook up. Not that he was actin’ or anything, but he’d wanted to feel okay.

Steve kissed Billy’s forehead like he was a little kid – that shit really made Billy want to die, was like he couldn’t handle it. He couldn’t really move away or anything though. Steve moved around and shifted down a little further back on his pillow so’s they were both just looking at each other again.

He put his hand on the side of Billy’s face again; his fingers curved over Billy’s jaw. He used his thumb to wipe away some of Billy’s tears which made him feel even dumber. “Hey, man, you were so awesome today, you were so brave,” Steve told him.

Billy sniffled some more. He almost wanted to laugh. “Yeah? Don’t feel awesome.”

"You totally were." Steve still had his hand on Billy's face, swiping against the bruise on his cheekbone. It didn't really hurt. "You know I – I never really, I don't know if I could ever do somethin' like that. I'm really, uh, proud of you or whatever, I know you hate when I say that crap."

"What, for knockin' my old man out?"

Steve made one of his cute faces. "Well, you know, he kinda deserved it," he said; Billy didn't answer him. "And hey, I mean, you know, you, you stopped, I bet you wouldn't have done that a year ago."

A year ago Billy wouldn't have even started. "Feel like I made a mistake or somethin'."

"You didn't make a mistake, what were you supposed to do?" Steve asked him. "He was gonna – hurt Max, he was – I feel like an asshole, I was just sittin' there too." He wiped Billy's face off again. "Hey, come on. You know, your dad is kind of a pussy, you've pushed me around like way harder than that when we were just foolin' around."

Billy was pretty sure he was crying even harder again; he took a couple seconds. "Sorry," he managed. "Didn't mean to let him do that to you."

Steve looked real overwhelmed again; his pretty eyes got big. "You – no, that's not what I – okay, you know what, I, I'm just gonna stop sayin' shit, I keep sayin' the wrong stuff – "

"S'okay if you're mad at me," Billy told him.

"Jesus Christ." Now he did actually look mad; Billy was gonna cry even more. "I'm not *mad at you*, Bill, I don't care about that, I'm ... I, I, your dad could knock me over a buncha times, I'd still wanna be here with you."

God him saying that shit made Billy want to go curl up and die again. There was nowhere to go and die though since Steve still had his arm around him and they were both just lookin' at each other. "Me too."

"I don't give a shit about your dad."

"I don't care 'bout him either."

"It's okay if you do," Steve told him. "But, uh – you know, it's over now. It's okay, I mean, you're gonna be okay."

"I guess." He didn't know how. He put his head back down on the pillow and cried some more. It felt fucking awful; it felt good to feel that way, to let yourself feel that awful. He cried for a long time, felt like everything bad was comin' out of him. He cried until he felt totally empty and then he managed to stop.

They just kept on laying there. Even after Billy stopped crying, his breath kept hitchin' in his throat; it took him a while to calm down. Finally that stopped too.

Steve just laid there staring at him the whole time and petting his back and his shoulder. Now that he was finished fucking crying, Billy kinda felt like he should feel real stupid, but he didn't feel that way yet. Maybe that'd come later. He didn't want Harrington to look at him different or something.

"Are you okay now?" Steve asked him finally, after a long time. "What d'you wanna do, do you want me to make you some food or something?"

Billy thought about it. "M'tired."

"That's okay, we can just go to sleep."

That wasn't really what he'd meant. He wished he could tell Steve – fuck. He didn't know. He wished he could say all the shit he hadn't said to Hopper earlier. Steve knew some of it but Billy wished he could say more, say all of it.

He thought about back when he and Elijane had been stuck in that awful place with those assholes, locked up alone by themselves. How she'd been rootin' around in his brain the whole goddamn time and how pissed he'd been. He wished he could show Steve just, like, just a second of that, and then he'd never have to talk again. Then Harrington would know everything and he'd know how Billy felt about him or whatever. He wouldn't have to say his dumb shit

anymore like *I thought you were lookin' for a new boyfriend at the mall* or whatever fuckin' crap he'd been saying last month when they'd had their fight or whatever. He'd know how Billy felt about his dad too, and about Max. Billy said, "You know my dad always hurt me real bad."

There was this short pause. "Yeah, I, uh –"

"Pro'lly by the time I was like five or six he knew where to hit me real bad, get me to shut up."

Steve stared at him. He had this massively weird look on his face, like he felt sorry for Billy again.

That was fucking awful but Billy made himself keep talking. "I just, uh." He wasn't even really sure what he wanted to say. "You know, like. When I was a kid I used to think everybody's parents did that shit to 'em."

"Yeah, they really don't," Steve said in another one of his weird voices.

Billy was quiet for a couple seconds. He didn't really know if Steve was understanding what he meant – he didn't want Harrington to feel bad for him. He was just tellin' him. "Max don't really deserve that shit," he said finally. "I just, I just, uh, I don't want her to – I ain't hit him for me. My dad I mean. That ain't why I called the chief."

Steve didn't answer him for a while too; Billy thought that maybe he just didn't have anything to say to that, or didn't know what to say. That was okay because how would he know. Finally Steve said, real slow, "Um, okay, right, but ... you, you know you didn't deserve that either, right? I mean whenever you'd get beat on or whatever, you know you didn't actually deserve that. Or, like, when he would say all that screwed up crap to you. Parents aren't actually supposed to treat their kids like that, you didn't deserve that stuff." Billy didn't answer him so Steve said all loud, "You *know* that, right?"

"Don't scream at me, I'm already fuckin' crying," Billy told him.

Steve made a strange sound, some kinda overwhelmed laugh. "Jesus.

I'm, I'm sorry, I'm just askin' if you know."

"Sure, I know all that," Billy lied. "Just meant I can take it better."

"You don't have to do that anymore."

"I know that."

"You don't ever have to do that again."

Jesus God. It was too much; Billy'd just got himself to stop crying. He closed his eyes for a couple seconds. "Come on, man."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry, I just ... " Harrington stared at him some more. He looked real sad or some shit again and it was making Billy feel kinda embarrassed. "I dunno. I wish I knew you when we were kids or something," he said. He was startin' up with his white-knight shit and Billy was too tired for that.

"Prolly woulda fuckin' hated me anyway," Billy told him. "Woulda made fun of you real bad."

Steve made one of his cute faces; his forehead wrinkled up. "Uh, yeah, you kinda do that now."

"Knocked ya out at dodgeball or whatever."

"That's not really possible, I was actually like super awesome at dodgeball, *kinda* had a monopoly on the jungle-gym too, you know, like when you'd play king of the mountain," Steve told him all impassioned like the biggest fuckin' nerd Billy'd ever met in his life; Billy stared at him and Steve started laughing. "Okay, yeah, I guess we, we wouldn't have really been best friends or whatever."

"The fuck's king of the mountain, some hick shit?"

"No, it's – when you – " Harrington looked all distressed over Billy's sad neglected childhood or whatever for a second, then he laughed and shook his head. "Nevermind, it's, it's just like a really dumb game where you have to knock people over, actually you woulda been great at it. I'll teach ya one night. We can practice on the Monster Squad."

That made Billy feel happy; he'd been waitin' all summer to knock Henderson over and break his goddamn radio. "Okay."

Steve laughed again. He probably knew what Billy was thinkin' too. He sat up a little and started tugging at one of the belt-loop on Billy's jeans. "Hey, come on, sit up. Roll over, I wanna hold you or whatever. You're takin' up my whole bed."

"Okay." Billy totally wasn't taking up the whole bed but he sat up and turned over onto his other side. Steve laid down again and slung an arm around him. He pressed up close against Billy's back and tucked his chin against Billy's shoulder. Billy guessed Harrington really was always the big spoon after all; he wondered if he should feel offended or like a girl or something.

Even now it still took him a long time to feel okay. He wasn't really crying anymore but he still felt kind of weak or shaky or something, like real tired. It felt really late.

Steve tightened his arms around Billy and kissed the back his neck and the side of his jaw where he could reach, just below his ear. They just laid there for a while, listening to the sounds of the house and the sounds outside of Steve's window. There was a thud as the back door opened and closed downstairs and the girls came inside: Billy heard Max and Beverly yappin' away to each other for a while down in the living room. It took 'em a long time to quiet down; Steve and Billy just laid there listening to them.

"Gee, uh, guess Max's okay," Steve said dryly.

"Yeah." She would be, anyway, at least Billy was pretty sure.

Steve stretched a little and hooked an ankle over Billy's. "Are you, do you feel better now?"

"Mm." Billy thought about it; mostly he just felt fucking exhausted. Steve's bed was always real comfy too even though it was too small. He still felt kind of fucked up but maybe it was okay. He guessed he felt, like, safe or whatever. "Think so."

"Do you need me to do something? What do you want?"

“Dunno.” He chewed on his lower lip for a while. He didn't know what he wanted; he guessed he wanted the whole fuckin' day to never have happened. He kinda wanted Steve to say that he loved him again but that wasn't really something he could just ask for, at least it didn't feel like it.

Steve's arm felt good around him, anyway. Billy said, “Can you – just talk to me for a while?”

Steve didn't answer him for a few seconds; maybe he really wanted to go to sleep or something. Then he said, “Uh, sure!” all loud. “Yeah, I can do that.” He shifted around some more and then pressed his face against Billy's shoulder for a second; his cheek was scratchy. His mouth was real close to Billy's ear. “Okay, well, we didn't really get to discuss this last week, you wanna hear my thoughts on *The Lost Boys*?”

Billy laughed a little. “Sure,” he said.

Billy woke up twice: the first time it was about three AM and his whole left side was asleep from Steve layin' on his arm. Billy tried to get away without movin' too much and ended up waking Steve up anyway; Steve rolled over onto his back and crushed Billy some more. “Hm? You okay?” He sounded really sleepy.

“Yeah, you're layin' on me. My arm's numb.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Steve shifted over and smushed Billy against the wall some more but finally gave him his arm back. He ran his hand down Billy's shoulder a couple times; it felt all tingly. He held Billy's hand and rubbed his thumb against Billy's palm a couple times. “Better?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Sorry, my bed's too small.”

“That's okay.” Steve was just looking at him in the dark; he leaned over and kissed Billy so Billy kissed him back, for a couple minutes. He put a hand low on Steve's shirt and touched his pointy little hipbones for a while.

Harrington was laying on his back still with his neck craned at a weird angle so's they could kiss. His huge amazing boner looked like a fucking tent in his dorky pajamas or something; Billy'd probably tease him if he didn't want him so much.

Steve made a funny sound when Billy moved his hand lower and pressed the palm of his hand against Steve's cock. "Uh, you can just ignore that."

"I'm good now," Billy told him. He felt sleepy and he just wanted Steve. They could just keep kissing or whatever if Harrington wanted.

"Yeah? Okay." They wiggled around on the bed and kissed some more; Steve got Billy on top of him and put his arms around him. Billy felt a little dizzy but it was still good. Somehow he managed not to fucking cry again or whatever when they both came.

When Billy woke up again he wasn't sure where he was for a moment – he had too many pillows and the sun was bright in his eyes. Everything that had happened yesterday came back to him slowly; it felt like a huge weight falling down on top of him. He laid there for a while, thinking of everything.

Steve wasn't in the bed anymore but he'd left the door open and Billy could hear him moving around downstairs and talking to someone; he hoped it wasn't Harrington's mom. He smelled coffee brewing so eventually he sat up. It was a little before seven and he was gonna have to go to work in about an hour. Shit. Okay.

He remembered that he had to go in and talk to Hopper today and he was trying not to feel freaked out about it. What if he had to see Max's mom or some shit. What if they asked him too much shit, or what if they thought he was makin' it up.

Billy got up and got dressed. He didn't have a shirt to wear so after a moment he started going through Harrington's bureau; he figured it'd be okay to take something since Steve hawked Billy's clothes all the time. He felt real nervous or sick thinkin' about going down to the police station. He wanted to try and look nice and not like a degenerate or whatever for once. He found a shirt of Steve's that wasn't too dorky and put it on; it still had a collar though.

Max and Beverly were still passed out in the den when Billy walked past it downstairs; Steve was in the kitchen in one of his work getups already, burning something on the stove and talkin' to Luke and Leia, who were ignoring him and staring fixedly at the sausage burning on the stovetop. Steve looked up and smiled when he saw Billy so Billy felt okay.

"Hey, I didn't wanna wake you up yet, I gotta leave in like half an hour. I was making you food." Steve turned the stove burner off so's he wouldn't ruin the eggs any more.

"Thanks."

It wasn't exactly awkward or anything but Billy couldn't seem to think up too much to say. He still kind of felt like maybe Harrington felt different about him now, or maybe he felt bad or something. He just didn't know what to say.

The bright sun shining into the kitchen made it look all homey and shit; it felt totally different than yesterday when everybody'd been sitting around at the table all fucked up. Steve was just talking and drinking his coffee and it felt like Billy could almost forget about everything that'd happened the other day. Except he couldn't really forget; he shouldn't.

He made himself a plate as Steve poured him some coffee, then sat down at the table. He didn't think he could eat too much but he guessed he was hungry after all. Harrington was getting better at cooking: he'd made toast, too, eggs and sausage, which Billy liked even more than bacon, even though he couldn't remember ever actually sayin' that to Steve.

He ate his food while Steve leaned at the counter with his own plate and talked and talked. He'd tried to wake Max up two times but she hadn't moved at all aside from to kick him twice, Steve said, even when Luke had licked her face. "Don't know why she kicked *me*, I wasn't lickin' her face," Harrington said like a nerd. His mom wasn't coming home until late tonight so Billy could hang out here for as long as he wanted, Steve said. "I can leave work early if you want, just let me know what you want to do."

Billy finished eating; he got up to put his plate in the sink. "Uh, doesn't matter."

"Okay." Steve slid his own plate down onto the counter and stared at Billy. He looked so dumb and cute in his grey slacks for work and his stupid blue shirt; Billy wanted him to stay right there all day. He put a hand on Billy's wrist and tugged him over a little, so Billy stepped over to the side so that they were facing each other. He felt like a little baby or something, he couldn't quite pick his head up to look at Harrington, even though they were standing real close. "You okay?" Steve asked him.

"Sure, I think so," Billy said. Steve put an arm around his waist and played with the stupid collar of Billy's shirt for a moment with his other hand, smoothing it down.

"Hey, looks nice on you."

"Thanks," Billy said. He chewed on his lip. "Sorry I fuckin' cried on you so much last night."

"Oh, what, that?" Harrington scrunched his nose up and made one of his cute faces; he was being super stupid. "Please, I cried like way more than that three years ago when my Atari broke, that was nothin' compared to that."

Billy knew that Harrington was tryin' to make him feel better or whatever. He guessed it helped a little. Steve was still an inch or so taller than him, even leaning back against the counter, which was usually annoying, but not right now. Billy put his face down against Steve's neck so Steve put his other arm around him, too. They just stood like that for a couple seconds, probably looked like total morons.

"So, uh, what are you gonna do?" Steve asked him.

"Gotta go to work."

"Sure, I know that," Steve said like Billy'd said something funny. He hesitated for a moment, running a hand down Billy's back. "But what are you – are you still gonna go down to, the ... uh ... are you still

gonna go see Hopper?”

“Yeah, I gotta.”

“Okay,” Steve said. He started pettin' Billy's hair like he was a little kid or something; it felt nice anyway. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“Think so.”

“What are you, ah, gonna say?”

“Just gotta tell him what happened.”

“You'll do great,” Steve told him; Billy wasn't so sure. “You can call me if you want, you know, whenever, just talk to Linda.”

“Okay,” Billy said. He really might have to call Steve later like a fuckin' baby; he didn't know he was gonna feel later. “Thanks.”

He just stood there like and idiot and kept his head on Steve's shoulder and Steve kept his arms around him. They stayed there like that for a while until Billy started feeling majorly stupid and all with the fuckin' dogs looking at them. “Okay.” He pulled away and went to get more coffee.

“Okay, yeah, I'm – gonna be super late.” Steve was putting his tie on and choking himself with it. He kissed Billy two times at the table and then grimaced when he bashed his knee against the side of it. “Fuck, awesome. I gotta go, you guys can just hang out here, you can come back later if you want.”

He petted Luke and Leia and then left. The front door opened and closed, then opened and closed again. Steve came back in. “Ha, forget my keys,” he said like a nerd; they were still on the counter. He kissed Billy again. “Okay, I'm really leaving now. Call me later and tell me what happens, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” Steve just stood there looking at him. “What, I will.”

Harrington left and Billy sat around with his coffee, watching the minutes tick by on the little clock above the stove. He was thinking about all the stuff he was gonna have to say to the chief, if he could

really do it or not. He felt sick, thinking about it, but he also just felt really tired. On the ground by his feet, Luke huffed loudly.

Okay. Billy got himself in gear. He put his coffee mug in the sink too, then went to go wake the girls up.

Notes for the Chapter:

Big chapter! I hope you guys liked it. I just need to give a shoutout to Faith, Lex, and Aida for their help and input on this part! :) ♥️☐

16. Chapter Sixteen

Summary for the Chapter:

“Should we say a few words?” Dustin asked like a moron. “Rest in pieces, Billy’s coffee table, she looked like real wood and everything.”

“She was real wood, you asshole,” Billy told him. Probably pine or some cheap shit but still.

“She was a great height,” Henderson said solemnly.

“Yeah, was real sturdy too.” He already missed havin’ a place to kick his feet up.

Dustin turned and looked over at Harrington. “Steve?”

“What, really?” Harrington rubbed at his eye for a moment; he looked super amused by the two of them. “Okay, uh, yeah, the watermarks on the glass part gave it real character.”

Chapter Sixteen

Going down to the police station sucked ass; Billy’d known it would.

He went into work and Hank let him leave right away. By the time he’d walked himself down to the shop from Harrington’s place, it had been a little before eight; even so Billy was still the first person there. He spent a while opening the garage up and then sat at the counter, cleaning up the mess of paperwork Hank’d left behind for him on Friday night. Friday felt like it’d been about a thousand goddamn years ago.

Hank showed up about twenty minutes later, talking and gabbing away with his brother Miles. That was fucking perfect – lately Miles had only been coming into the shop three or four times a month, and

usually just in the afternoons, but of course he'd pop up on a Monday fucking morning right after Billy'd just got into a bunch of shit with his old man.

Hank held the door for his brother and then eased it shut so's that it wouldn't slam and make the bell go all crazy. He was still half-turned to the side, yapping to Miles about the baseball game that Billy'd missed last night and chuckling like a motormouth.

“Get a load'a Billy's shirt, you got somewhere fancy to be?” he said like an asshole, then laughed at himself. “Got you a coffee, Bill.” He turned and actually looked over at Billy; his whole face dropped and he almost dropped his coffee cup, too. “Shit, kid, the hell happened to your goddamn *face*?”

Really Billy didn't think it was that bad or anything. He hadn't bothered to check himself out in the mirror at Harrington's house – he didn't wanna see what he looked like – but he'd caught a glimpse of his face in the big window at the front of the garage when he'd been unlocking everything earlier. He did have a bruise and a little cut on the side of his temple from where his old man had brained him yesterday but it wasn't too bad: he'd shown up to work lookin' way worse than this before.

Hank and his brother barreled over to him before Billy could respond – they looked like they was in a goddamn TV drama or some shit. Any other time it probably would have been pretty funny, Billy guessed, but right now it just made him feel super overwhelmed. Hank looked like he was gonna crash right through the counter; Billy backed up in his chair and almost hit the wall.

“What the *fuck*, Bill! What happened t'ya?” Hank demanded.

“Uh, nothin', I was – ”

“Je-sus *Christ*, kid.”

“Hank, you're fuckin' scaring him!” Miles said.

“No I ain't!” Hank leaned over the counter and huffed away. He pulled his little towel out of the back pocket of his jeans; it was still

folded all nice since it was so early. “Je-sus Christ,” he said again. “Happy Monday, you look like shit, kid,” he puffed out.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“What the hell happened to ya, Bill? Your boyfriend knock ya around or something?” Hank asked him; Miles elbowed him *hard* in the arm with all his fairy strength and Hank almost spilled his coffee again.

“Really? That's the first thing you're gonna ask him?”

“Why you wanna hit me?” Hank asked all affronted. He wiped his forehead off with the towel. “That ain't the first fuckin' thing I asked him, I asked him what the hell happened to his goddamn *face*.”

“He's not my – ” Billy tried to say that Steve wasn't his boyfriend and then found that he couldn't say it. He hadn't been expecting some big production this early and he still didn't know what-all he wanted to say. It almost felt like he couldn't lie to Hank or something. “My dad fuckin' clocked me, showed up at my place yesterday.”

“No shit?” Hank breathed out. “You okay, kid?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. Right here, ain't I?”

“What happened with your old man?”

Billy didn't answer for a second; he still wasn't sure what he wanted to say. He pretty much knew what he was gonna have to tell the chief – he'd already said most of it already – but he hadn't really thought about tellin' his boss all about it and shit. *Bosses*, he guessed, since Miles was kind of his boss too, if you wanted to get real technical. “Uh, he wanted to bring Maxine home, he was grabbin' at her and shit. Turned into this big thing. I hit him a couple times, called the cops on him.”

“No *shit*,” Hank said again. “Jesus, Bill, I'm sorry. Red's okay?”

“Sure, she's fine.”

“Chief'll get him,” Hank told him. “We know you watched his kid the other week, he'll help ya out. About time somebody did something

about your shitbag of a father. You know last week I was talkin' to Marty down at the bar, he said that your old man – ”

“Okay, chill out, Chatty,” Miles told him.

“I'm just tellin' him something, goddamn! You okay, kid?” Hank asked again.

“Yeah, I – ” There was no reason for it but Billy felt massively fucking weird. He guessed he kinda always did whenever Hank would talk bad about his old man, as if it was *Billy* who was the one sayin' it. Nobody'd ever really gave a shit before. “I guess I – wanted to ask ya if I could leave for a while. I gotta go and talk to Hopper. He wants me to come in today, Max too. Wants me to, uh, put a restraining order out on my dad. Guess I gotta fill out paperwork.”

Hank and Miles just stared at him and Billy felt even weirder. He hated asking for time off and shit – he needed this job. Asking about goin' away for vacation or whatever was different; now he felt like a fucking dumbass for coming in and asking to go right away. He'd already missed a bunch of time back at the start of summer. “I can come back right after,” he said. “Won't take all day.” He hoped, anyway.

“I – yeah, sure, Bill, you can go.” Hank was still staring at him. He mopped his face off with his towel again; Billy didn't know how he was all fucking sweaty already just standin' there. Maybe he needed to talk to a doctor about that. “That's fine. You know you didn't have to come in today, you coulda called me.” Billy hadn't thought of that; he didn't say anything again. “You wanna take the day off, kid?”

Really he didn't know what the fuck he'd do with himself if he couldn't come back to work and had to sit at home all day or something, thinkin' about shit. “That's okay,” he said. “I can come back, I can still work.”

“Only if ya want to.”

“Do you need a ride or something, Billy?” Miles asked him. “I've got my truck today, either one of us can take you.”

The police station was right off the main drag, just like about everything here in Hawkins, maybe only a quarter-mile away. Billy figured he really didn't need Hank or Miles or the fuckin' both of him driving him out there and making a big scene: he got this horrible flash of an image of Hank burstin' into the lobby of the municipal building, all sweaty with his little towel and his coffee, bellowing for Hopper. "Uh, that's okay," he said again in horror. "You don't gotta do all that."

"Shit, kid. I wish I had your car done for ya. You need to go and pick up kid sis?" That was Hank askin' him.

"She's going in later with her moms," Billy told him. It was Monday so Max was due in at the general store by nine – she'd given him a kinda funny look earlier when he'd asked her if she wanted to go down to the station with him and had told him that Susan was gonna be pickin' her up at noon. That'd made him feel kinda stupid: of course she'd go in with her mom and not him.

"That's okay, Bill. Don't worry, the chief'll take care of it."

Hank and Miles fussed over him for about five minutes more and then sent him on his way; really Billy had to fucking beg Hank not to drive him. The walk down to the police station took about ten minutes and Billy dreaded every step. It was a little before nine but most of Hawkins was still waking up: some of the shop-fronts along the end of Main Street didn't even have their lights on yet.

The station was attached to the big municipal building and the town hall where people came to pay their taxes and shit; Billy went left down two narrow little hallways and walked up to the glass window that said HAWKINS PD.

Hopper was already there on the other side, leaning over the desk and talking to some overwhelmed-looking secretary lady. That saved Billy from lookin' like a total dumbass because he realized he didn't have a fucking clue what to say.

"Hey kid, you showed up," Hop said right away, looking up at him. "I was about to call your job and get you down here."

"Can I help you?" the secretary asked through the glass; Hopper made a face over at her.

"Thanks, I got him," he said dryly. "Where's my protection order? I drew this shit up last night, I wanna get this taken care of, put it through before the afternoon." The chick rummaged around with her papers and Hopper snapped his fingers at her; he was such a charmer. "I literally left it *right* here."

"Oh, well, that was so nice of you not to file it," the lady said back all smart. "I didn't work last night, Cindy was here."

"Yeah? Gee, wow, when Cindy comes in, tell her thanks so much for losing my goddamn paperwork – "

"I'm sure she didn't *lose it* –"

"Guess it must've just flown into the wrong drawer all by itself. I don't know how anybody around here gets a goddamn thing done without – " Hop started goin' off; she shoved a buncha papers in his face.

"Got it!"

"Oh, okay. All right." The chief looked slightly mollified. He also looked like he wished he was smoking about eight cigarettes; Billy knew the feeling.

Hop glanced up at him again. "Hey, sorry, you can come on back." He moved out of view for a couple seconds to open up a door off to the side so that Billy could follow him into the office; it was a big open space with two rows of desks and a long hallway.

The chief snapped his fingers again at the chick who wasn't Cindy – Billy bet it was a great time for all involved, workin' under Hopper. "Tell Marcia to come downstairs in ten, meet me in my office. You doing all right?" he asked Billy.

"Yeah, I'm good." Billy followed him past the rows of desks and then down the hallway. There was this long awkward moment as they stood around, waiting for the elevator to ding.

Hopper had a funny look on his face; he looked way less irritated than he had two minutes ago. He twisted the papers up into a big cone in his hands. "Hey, look, this is only going to take about an hour or so, you won't have to be here all day."

"Okay."

"I won't make it too tough on ya, I already started fillin' stuff out."

"Okay. Thanks." They waited around for the elevator some more; Billy didn't really know what-all to say to the chief. If he wanted to admit it to himself, he felt massively freaked out: he knew everybody had their stories about him and shit, but he'd never been in an actual police station before or nothin'. It felt like Hop was gonna just look at him and know all the bad shit he'd ever done, like when he'd snuck onto those rich people's boat out in Long Beach, or when he'd spray-painted that yield sign when he'd been sixteen. "You got my dad here or what?"

Hopper made this super weird face; after a moment Billy realized he was like smiling or something. The elevator creaked open and Hop held the door with a hand. "Yeah, no, it doesn't really work like that, it's not like in the movies." They got into the elevator and Hop stabbed at one of the buttons, taking them down to the basement.

Billy thought that maybe the chief was just done talking but then he spoke up again. "Don't worry, your dad's – ah, he's not here. We don't really keep anybody here at the station anymore, well, not overnight if we can help it. We've only got two holding cells, haven't used 'em since I caught those kids shoplifting at the video store back in the springtime."

"Okay," Billy said.

"That was a big thing for me," Hop told him. "Sometimes if I'm lucky I get to toss a couple asshole teenagers in there for a few hours til their parents come cryin' to me. When somebody gets arrested like your father, they get transported to county and processed out in Marion. Your dad's not gonna pop up to scream some shit at you, not that I'd let him."

“He say anything to you?”

Hopper made another smiling-not-smiling face. “Oh, yeah, he said a lot of shit to me, made it way worse for himself.” Billy didn't want to think about all that his old man had probably had to say to Hopper. “I, ah, let your cat back in last night,” the chief said awkwardly. “Don't know if you've been home yet.”

He'd already forgotten all about Chewy; he guessed he was lucky his old man hadn't fuckin' strangled her or threw her out the goddamn window. Wasn't no *pet sematary* around here that he could bring her to to appease Maxine, he was pretty sure. “I didn't go back yet.”

“Yeah, I figured. I'm just lettin' you know. I don't know what you're going to walk back into. My ex-wife used to have this big ugly fucker, used to tear our curtains up whenever we'd leave for more than an hour.”

Right. Billy didn't know what to say to that either; he guessed he'd never really thought he'd be makin' small talk with Hopper. Usually they just talked about the kid, if they even talked at all.

They got down to Hop's office and then sat around for a while, waiting for his secretary or deputy or whatever she was to show up. The chief told Billy that they needed to have a witness or whatever there so's that nobody could say that Billy'd been coerced into turnin' in his old man. Billy didn't know how he could be *coerced* since he was the one who'd come down here but he said okay.

Hopper's office was painted the same dim yellow as the hallway upstairs and it was kinda small, really. He had a huge desk with a bunch of photos and messy paperwork and trinkets, not one but two ashtrays. Billy sat across from him and had to use all of his willpower not to fidget or touch any of the chief's stuff even though he really wanted to; he felt like a little kid lookin' around at everything.

“You know I called for you last night at Steve's house,” Hop said suddenly. He was sitting sprawled back in his chair with his hands folded across his lap. “I wanted to make sure you'd really show up today, Harrington said you were pretty freaked out.”

Jesus God. It was so embarrassing – that was before he'd started fucking crying and all at least, he was pretty sure. “Yeah, guess I was.”

“It's okay to, uh, feel that way,” Hopper told him. “You shouldn't have had to do any of that shit yesterday.” Billy felt like a battered housewife again; he didn't answer. Hop cleared his throat. “Max doing okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, she's all right.” She'd just been her usual annoying self this morning already, eating all the food that Harrington had left out for them like things were fuckin' normal. “Better than me, I guess.”

“That's good. Kids that age, they're uh. You know. Really resilient.” Billy *didn't* know; he just sat there. “She'll be fine. You guys don't have to worry anymore.”

“Okay,” Billy said. They sat there some more.

A moment later Hopper's deputy finally showed up; Billy guessed she was actually a deputy since she was wearin' the same kinda brown suit as Hop was. She sat down too and the chief said that they could officially start the paperwork. Billy'd been looking forward to that so much.

Even so it didn't take too long and he didn't have to say too much shit like he'd been nervous about; Hopper took care of it like Hank'd said he would. Billy *did* have to rehash all the shit that had gone down yesterday but it wasn't that bad. Wasn't as bad as it'd been living through it, he guessed. He had to show Hop the bruise on his face and cuts on his arms and his hands from when they'd broken the table; the chief spent a couple minutes writin' it all down.

Billy wondered if they'd had to take inventory of his old man too yesterday. He'd looked way worse, and Billy couldn't help but feel like that was bad for him. Hopper had told him yesterday that he wouldn't get in trouble or whatever, but that'd been before the chief had actually seen Billy's dad and all.

Hop was still writing; his pen sounded real loud scratching against the paper. “And that's not the first time your father's done something

like this, correct?" he asked, turning his papers over. "For the record."

"Uh, never put me through a table before," Billy said. Well, at least that he could remember.

The chief stopped writing and looked up at him for a long moment and Billy felt like a total asshole; he hadn't actually been trying to be funny. He rubbed at his eyebrow on the side of his face that hadn't gotten all fucked up. "Yeah, he beat on me all the time," he mumbled.

"Okay. Okay." Hopper wrote some more. He wrote way more shit than what Billy'd just said, actually, which made him feel really fucking weird again.

"You wanna hear about it or somethin'?"

"No. You don't have to talk about that. This is just for yesterday." He kept on writing, though. Finally he stopped and asked Billy a couple more questions. It only took about ten more minutes, then Billy got to sign a bunch of shit.

"All right, so this is actually a protection order, we call it that instead of a restraining order when it's against your family. It's this new thing." Hopper was talking kind of a lot, way more than Billy was, anyway. "Sign one more time." Billy signed it. "Okay, now, all in all, this is just a fucking piece of paper. I can talk it up to you some more, but sometimes it really doesn't do shit."

"Sir," his deputy piped up.

"What?" Hop said sharply; his big office chair squeaked. "Come on, I'm speaking frankly, I know this kid."

"We just talked about you doing this at the meeting last month, you make people uncomfortable."

"Jesus Christ, really?" She just stared at him and Hop turned to Billy. "Do I make you uncomfortable?"

"No sir," Billy said automatically.

The deputy stared at Hop some more in what Billy felt was a real pointed way and the chief frowned. "Okay. Okay, I'm sorry. It doesn't do STUFF, I retract the *fucking*, my apologies," he said; she shuffled the papers and then Hop turned back to Billy again. "Listen, if he comes around again, then I can really get him, but let's hope he doesn't. Are you gonna want to press charges?"

"Uh, I dunno." Back to feeling massively fucking weird again.

"You don't have to do that right now," Hop told him. "That's a different form, anyway." He handed the last of the papers off to the chick and she stood up slowly, still staring at them. "Thank you so very much, we're all done here," Hopper said loudly. He just looked back at her until she took their papers and left.

"Okay," Hopper said once she'd closed the door up. He leaned forward in his squeaky chair. "Hey, you doing all right?"

"Yeah, sure," Billy said; it hadn't been that bad.

"I think your stepmom could come at your dad pretty hard over Maxine since she's a minor," the chief told him. "I don't know what exactly she's planning to do once she gets down here. If she did that, brought him to court, could you be a witness? They'd take it to trial, really put him away. Take a month or so, maybe two. Could you do that?"

Billy was pretty sure they'd had this conversation yesterday too. "What exactly would I have to do?"

"Uh, you would – " Hop was making one of his weird faces again – "you could, well, we'd call ya up, maybe one or two days. You'd have to talk about – you know, any incidents between you and your father, pretty much anything you'd wanna say that paints him out as a threat. I don't know if he's ever behaved, uh, inappropriately towards Maxine before this, you could talk about that too."

That was like a whole big thing that Billy didn't really want to think about right now. It would be a lot of people asking him shit, he knew that, and it wouldn't just be Hopper in his office then, usin' his battered-housewife voice. His dad would be there too, he guessed,

and Billy'd have to talk about him. His old man would probably hire some real fancy lawyer who'd really go at him, like in the movies or whatever.

He guessed he'd spent a while not-talking again because the chief was leaning forward in his chair. "Sorry, kid, you'd be like her best bet at gettin' him locked up. Could you do all that?"

Billy had to think about it; he guessed he already knew. He didn't know what-all Sue thought about him right now or if she'd even want him involved in it. But he guessed he'd do it, if it would really keep his old man away from Max and away from Susan. "Yeah, I can do that," he said. "What about my dad and all?"

Hopper looked at him blankly. "Far as I know, he's still up at county. I think they'll hold him for a day or so, takes at least that long to put him in the system."

"Nah, I meant, uh – " There was something wrong with him; it shouldn't be so hard to fucking talk. "I mean can't he, like, press charges against me or whatever too? I hit 'im and everything."

"No. No, he can't do that, because I already got him for breaking and entering, and then I'll get him for *harassment*," Hop told him in this real patient voice. "A B and E isn't always jail-time, but I can make it pretty bad for him. Worse comes to worse, I can always plant something on him."

Billy didn't say anything and Hopper just looked back at him. "That ... that was a joke," he said finally. He added, "Kinda."

"Yeah, I got that."

"Right." The chief sat back in his seat and stared at Billy some more. He rubbed a hand over his beard. "Listen, Billy," he said finally; it felt weird to hear Hop say his actual name. "Nothing's gonna happen to you anymore, okay? I know you got your MTV and shit, I guess I'm not exactly *Officer Friendly*. I don't know what kinda crap your dad's been feeding you for the last eighteen years." Billy was actually nineteen but he didn't point this out. "You're gonna need to trust me a little. Not everybody in this town is out to fuck you over."

“Okay,” Billy said. The chief just kept on starin' at him like he wanted Billy to say more shit. “I know that.”

“I said I'd help you, kid, I got you,” Hop told him. “He's not going to bother anyone again, all right?”

“Okay,” Billy said.

“Right,” Hopper said again in this weird voice. “Are you actually hearing me, or are you just saying *okay*?”

Billy looked back at him; for a second he wondered if he was gonna burst into fucking tears again or something. Then the feeling went away. “I hear you.”

“Okay,” Hop said too. He checked his wristwatch. “And, hey, look at that, it's only eleven o'clock. You want me to walk you out?”

“If you want.”

The chief walked him out: they went up the creaky elevator again and lapsed back into some more of their wonderful silence. Hopper took him over to the front office and patted at Billy's shoulder like Billy was a little kid or something. “You did good, you don't have to worry anymore.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Guess your sister's coming down with her mom in a while, you gonna hang out here? I can get you guys lunch.”

Billy felt that real true slight terror for the first time since he'd gotten up. He didn't want to think about seeing Susan, or hearing what she thought about him and everything that had gone down. Mostly he'd just been focused on makin' it through the morning, but he guessed that he knew eventually he was gonna have to hear it from her. Didn't need to be today, though. “I gotta go back to work.”

“Okay,” Hop said. “Yeah, that's okay. You wanna take a smoke break with me first.” He didn't exactly sound like he was asking so Billy said okay.

They went out front and walked slowly around to the side of the building; the sky was grey and it felt way late already even though it was still before noon. Hop lit up one of his horrible cigs – Marlboro Ultra Lights, definitely not menthol – and handed it over to Billy.

“Thanks,” Billy said anyway. He was pretty sure that Hop had way more important stuff to be doin' than standing around on the sidewalk and smoking with him. He graciously tried not to choke and gag on the Ultra Light.

Hopper billowed smoke out of his nose and tapped some ash onto the sidewalk. He was making another one of his weird faces again. “Listen, I'm sorry, but the kid went in real hard at me last night. I missed some goddamn Hepburn movie on the TV,” the chief told him; for a second Billy had no clue what the hell he was talking about. “She's real ticked off at me because I, you know, dared to go into work and let you and Max walk into all the shit. I told her to leave ya alone for today, but I think you got about thirty hours til she busts into your place makin' a fuss.”

Oh right. He'd actually completely forgotten about Jane what with all the shit that'd happened this weekend – he guessed she'd be upset for him if she'd heard about his dad from Hop. “That's okay, she can come over.”

Finally after another million years Hopper let him go and Billy went back to the shop. Hank immediately started up askin' him eighty more questions until his brother finally begged him to lay off, then Billy got to go on into the back and actually do some work.

Mondays weren't usually real busy at the garage, especially in the morning. Even so, they'd gotten two cars dropped off just since Billy had been gone: a newer Buick that needed the tail-lights replaced by the end of the day and a '71 Dodge Charger that had come in with a buncha engine problems and a dead starter.

Billy got down to work while Hank called his guy out in Two Forks to put in an order for more bulbs and the starter – Hank was a great boss and all, but he was total shit at doing inventory. Billy pulled himself under the Charger and went through his mental list like Hank'd taught him, checkin' out everything that might be wrong with

it.

Even though Hank was for shit at keeping up with supplies, he was real meticulous about the actual work or whatever – way better than the asshole at the autobody shop that Billy'd worked for back in Cali for a couple months. Whenever somebody came in, even just for an oil change, he and Hank always checked out the rest of the car too: Hank said it was no use givin' someone their ride back just for them to have to bring it back in a week later.

The Charger was leaking oil for no reason that Billy could see – he'd have to ask Hank for help with it later which was annoying. They took their lunch at one and Hank went off to get a pizza as Billy tried his hardest not to think about what was goin' on with Max and Susan down at the station. He took Hank's truck out to Two Forks to pick up the parts for the week, then went back to the Charger.

Hank kept on coming on back into the garage and messing around with stuff and purposefully not-talkin' to Billy. Even still he could tell that Hank was just about burstin' to ask him a bunch more shit; he guessed he appreciated the restraint or whatever. Felt like he'd fucking die if he had to talk about stuff some more.

After a while Hank came back for the eighty-fourth time and stood leaning in the doorway to the garage and staring at Billy. “Bill, you done here yet? I'm gettin' ready to head out.”

“What?” Billy looked up from where he'd been scowling and cussing over the hood of the stupid fucking Charger and its stupid fucking inexplicable oil leak.

“S'almost five-thirty, I'm done for the day. You gonna stay here all night?”

“Uh, was gonna try and finish this.”

“Leave it for tomorrow, it ain't goin' nowhere,” Hank told him. “It's raining pretty hard out, you need a ride home?”

“That's okay, man. I don't mind walkin'.” Really he didn't need any charity rides home from his boss or whatever.

“You're on the way.”

“Uh, that's okay,” Billy said again. “You don't gotta do that.”

Hank huffed and puffed away in the doorframe; for a second he looked kinda annoyed and Billy didn't know why. “Jesus Christ, kid, I'm just asking you if you need a fucking ride home. Ain't like you never helped me out before, you got somewhere to be?”

Not everybody in this town is out to fuck you over. Billy felt like a piece of shit; he knew Hank was okay and all. He guessed that he really didn't feel like walking home in the rain anyway. “Nah, I just – okay, lemme put my shit away.”

He closed up the hood of the Charger and cleaned his tools up, then he and Hank locked the front. They walked out to his truck and got in.

Now that he was actually sitting down or whatever, Billy felt tired as fuck – he guessed that he hadn't really stopped once today, even just to eat lunch. He felt real wiped out and he had a kinda headache too and his eyes all felt dry, probably from fucking crying so much yesterday. Steve always seemed to get headaches from being annoyed at his work or forgettin' his glasses; he wondered if this was how Harrington felt all the time. Billy should try to be nicer to him.

It usually only took him about ten minutes walking to get to the shop or to get back home. Even with Hank driving at his old-man speed, it didn't take too long to reach the apartment complex. Hank parked his truck in front of the building and turned his engine off; that meant he wanted to have a big goddamn conversation.

“You okay, Bill?” Hank asked him for the eighty-fifth time. Billy really wished people would stop asking him that shit.

“Yeah, I'm good.”

“You know, you ever need to talk to somebody, you could always come to me or my brother,” Hank told him.

Billy lamented his life; they were parked right in front of the goddamn building but he was totally trapped. “Yeah, thanks,” he

said.

"I mean it, Bill," Hank told him. "Hey, it's good that you stuck up for Red with your old man, it's fucked up that he came into your place. I been hearing some shit about your dad, know he got into that real bad bar fight last month."

Billy guessed he felt surprised or something. *He* certainly hadn't been hearing shit about his dad. Who would he hear it from, he guessed. "Yeah? I didn't know that."

"I know you feel like shit right now, but it'll get better," Hank said. "Sometimes you gotta let people go."

Christ he almost wanted to cry again or something; he didn't talk for a couple seconds. "How the fuck m'I supposed to let him go if he won't leave me alone?"

"Hop'll take care of him for ya," Hank told him again. He turned the truck's engine on again, letting Billy off the hook. "Listen, come in at ten tomorrow if you want. We can work on your car some more, I know ya need it."

"Thanks," Billy said; he wished he could let Hank know he really meant it. There was so much more shit he could say but he was too tired to say it. He opened his door up. "Thanks for the ride. See ya tomorrow."

"Later, kid."

It felt weird gettin' back to his place, as if he'd been gone way longer than about twenty-four hours. Hopper must have locked everything up after he'd left last night – it was only pure dumb luck that Billy'd had his housekeys in his jeans pockets yesterday and was even able to get in. The stupid cat made a beeline for him once he'd opened the door up, meowing loudly and tripping herself over his boots.

Billy nudged her away and looked around – didn't look like she'd tore anything up. His smashed-up coffee table was gone now and the living room looked totally different without it, almost too empty. He

guessed that Hop had cleaned that up for him, maybe moved it outside for the trash. There wasn't even any glass on the ground and the vacuum was out; all his books and Max's magazines were stacked up on the couch. Looked like the chief had even tried to get Billy's old man's blood out of the carpet. It made Billy feel massively weird again, thinkin' of Hopper doing that shit for him.

He sat down on the couch and felt wiped out for a while. He thought about what he should do; maybe call Harrington or something like he'd said he would. He should probably take a shower first, and he needed to eat somethin'.

Chewy let out another one of her gross yowls and Billy glared down at her; she was standing on the floor where the coffee table'd been and looking up at him like a fuckin' dumbass.

"What? What you want now?" Billy asked her. She pounced up onto his lap right away; her stupid collar that Max'd got her jingled. "Okay, all right, Jesus."

He hefted Chewy up and held her before she could dig her stupid evil claws into his dick or something – she seemed to love doing that, mostly to Harrington. "Hey, bitchy." He scratched behind her ears. "You see my asshole dad yesterday?"

"*Mew*," Chewy said in derision; she flicked her fluffy tail against Billy's arm.

"Yeah, man, I hear ya."

There was a loud thump out in the hallway and then someone started banging on the door like crazy; Billy almost dropped the cat. It was dumb but for a second he almost felt real scared or whatever.

"BILLY, ARE YOU IN THERE? IT'S ME, OPEN UP!" someone yelled their head off; it was Henderson. He banged away on the door some more.

"Oh, my god, Dustin, can you not frickin' do that? He's probably not even here yet," Billy heard Harrington say.

"BILLY!!!" Henderson screamed again like a crazy person in a movie.

Billy stood up; the cat dug her claws into his shirt so he picked her up too. He went over to the door, unlocked it and swung it open. "Yo, what the hell's going on?"

Henderson didn't exactly answer him. He barreled his way into the apartment and stood there lookin' around and Steve followed him in. Dustin was sweatin' away in his usual baggy hoodie and Steve was just wearing a regular t-shirt now (not one of Billy's) instead of the blue shirt from this morning; he still had his cute slacks from work on though. "Sorry," he mouthed exaggeratedly at Billy. Then he said, "Awww, hi!" in a squeaky voice and started pettin' the cat.

Jesus God. Billy rolled his eyes and handed her over. "What you doing here?" he asked Dustin.

"I heard what happened yesterday, I wanted to see if you were okay," Henderson said. "Where's Max at, is she here?" He leaned over and looked behind the couch like a fruitcake.

"Okay, why the fuck would she be *hiding* behind the couch?" Steve said.

"I don't know, Steve, she might be traumatized!"

"She's with her mom," Billy told the kid.

"Yeah, but are you okay?" Henderson asked him. "Sorry that I left yesterday, I totally would have helped you beat up your dad."

"Oh, yeah, would you?" Steve asked all sarcastic.

Dustin burstin' in here all worked up made Billy feel pretty weird, too – he kind of felt like an asshole or whatever. He knew that he'd helped Henderson out with his girl last year and all, and now he was going running with the kid, helping him get in shape. He'd thought a buncha times that Henderson wasn't that bad (well, when he wasn't talkin', at least, which rarely happened), but he guessed he'd never really considered the kid to be a friend or whatever. He hadn't thought Dustin would wanna come over here right away and fucking check up on him. "Don't worry about it, it's fine. How'd you hear 'bout it already?"

"It was *not* me for once, I didn't tell him shit," Harrington put in right away.

"Will told me! He said he wanted to come here too, but he got stuck at work."

That was so great. Billy didn't know if Wills had heard all the shit from Maxine and her huge mouth already or – hell, he guessed maybe the chief woulda told Mrs. Byers or something; apparently they were kinda a thing now. "Sorry I didn't meet ya this morning."

"That's okay, I overslept anyway," Henderson told him. He folded his arms up and inspected Billy critically. "Holy shit, your face looks *brutal*."

Christ he was so sweet; Billy almost couldn't handle it. "Yeah, thanks. Doesn't hurt," he lied.

"You should get a band-aid or something, it could get infected!"

"Okay, he's – it's not that bad," Harrington said all faithful. He set Chewy down on the ground and she padded off to hide in Max's room, giving Henderson a wide berth as she went.

Steve turned to look at Billy, too, putting his hands on his hips; it was his standard Mr. Mom pose. "What, ah, what happened? I thought you were gonna call me," he said, kinda like Mr. Mom too. He was making Billy feel like a little kid or something.

"I was at work all day, I just got back here." There was no way that he coulda called Harrington today anyway, what with Hank fuckin' hovering over him all afternoon.

"What, really? I thought you were, you know, gonna go and talk to Hopper." Steve was making the squinty-face already too.

"Yeah, I did that."

"Oh. Uh, okay." He reached out and started rubbing at Billy's shoulders; Billy guessed that felt nice. He just stood there like a dope. "What happened, are you all right?"

"I guess so."

"You guys can kiss if you want, I won't look or anything," Henderson announced tactfully.

Jesus God. Well Billy guessed they definitely weren't gonna kiss *now*.

Steve made one of his funny annoyed noises and Billy had to try not to smile at him. "Dustin, can you just frickin' let me sit down with him for like *five* minutes?"

"What, I am, I'm literally not even doing anything!" Henderson tromped over to the kitchenette like he lived there and started digging around in the fridge; Billy let him since the kid'd been so nice as to come over here or whatever.

He and Harrington went and sat down on the couch together. Steve picked up all the books and fussed around with them for a couple seconds before finally setting them down on the floor. Out in the kitchen, something clanked loudly: "*Whoops!*" said Henderson.

Steve took the amazing glasses off of his face and started cleaning the lenses with his shirt. He looked like some kinda professor or something, windin' down for the day. "Sorry, he ambushed me, I didn't think he'd be frickin' booking it over here already," he said quietly.

"Oh, my god, Steve, Billy's my friend, TOO!" Henderson said from where he was halfway in the goddamn fridge.

Steve ignored him. "Are you okay?" he asked Billy again. He sounded like Hank or like the chief or some shit; Billy was so fucking tired of people asking him if he was *okay*.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Okay, well, what happened with Hopper?"

"Nothin', I guess. Filled the papers out."

Harrington gave him this look like Billy was being real funny or cute or something. "Yeah, thanks, I got that. I mean, what'd he say and

all?”

“I dunno, man. You want me to go through the whole fuckin' thing again?” Billy asked him, probably too sharply. Jesus Christ.

Now Steve looked all hurt and shit; he got this huge frown on his face. He put the amazing glasses back on. “Uh, no. Sorry,” he said. He just stared at Billy with his big brown eyes and Billy felt like a total prick. He'd *just* been thinking about how he needed to be fucking nicer to Harrington – Steve had done so much for him yesterday. “I just, uh, wanna know what's going on with you.”

“Sorry,” Billy said too. “Just was like a really long day.”

“No, that's, I mean, that's okay – “

He forced himself to say more shit. “Think he's gonna try to book my dad for comin' in here. He wants to try and get Max's mom to press charges.”

“Oh, wow. Okay, is that ... good?”

“I dunno. Guess it would be.”

“Did you hear anything from Susan yet?”

“Nah, man. I don't know what she's doin'.”

Henderson came lumbering back over with his plate finally; he'd made himself a whole goddamn sandwich. He sat down on the loveseat across from Steve and Billy, and then they all sat around for a couple minutes, lookin' at the empty space where the coffee table had been. “This feels so sad, are you going to get a new table?” Henderson asked.

“Yeah, maybe when I get paid again.”

“You should make your stupid dad pay for it,” Dustin told him; Billy didn't say anything.

“We can go and look next week if you want,” Steve offered.

“Uh, Steve, the carnival's next week, we're going to be really busy,” Henderson informed him. Steve made a great face and ignored him some more.

“So did you have to clean all the shit up in here? I woulda help you.”

“Nah, was like this when I came in. Guess the chief did it for me.”

“Oh, uh. Wow. Okay.” Steve made another face; he looked surprised as hell, just like Billy'd felt when he'd walked in here. “I guess that was – nice of him.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Should we say a few words?” Dustin asked like a moron. “Rest in pieces, Billy's coffee table, she looked like real wood and everything.”

“She *was* real wood, you asshole,” Billy told him. Probably pine or some cheap shit but still.

“She was a great height,” Henderson said solemnly.

“Yeah, was real sturdy too.” He already missed havin' a place to kick his feet up.

Dustin turned and looked over at Harrington. “Steve?”

“What, really?” Harrington rubbed at his eye for a moment; he looked super amused by the two of them. “Okay, uh, yeah, the watermarks on the glass part gave it real character.”

“It's a *she*, Steve!” Henderson lisped.

“Okay, what happened to your gender-neutral pronouns?” Steve asked him. Like usual Billy had no clue what weird shit they were talking about.

“In death, she should be commemorated as a lady!”

Billy laughed. “You're fuckin' retarded, man.” Henderson looked all pleased as if Billy hadn't just insulted him.

Harrington ran his hands through his pretty hair; Billy wanted to touch him. "So what are you doin' tonight?" he asked Billy.

"I dunno, nothin' I guess." He felt like a Garbage Pail Kid or something again: Steve looked all nice and shit like he usually did. Billy felt greasy and he probably smelled bad from bein' at the shop all day.

"We should get food, do you guys wanna get food?" Henderson asked them in two seconds.

Steve looked kinda annoyed. "Dustin, you just ate a frickin' sandwich."

"So what? It's six o'clock, that was an appetizer."

"Okay, I guess you're right." He rolled his eyes and turned back to Billy. "Wanna go to the diner? I'll buy you double fries."

"Yeah, if you want."

"YES!" said Henderson.

"Okay, we can, ah – "

The phone rang and they all looked over, motionless. After two more rings Billy reluctantly stood up and went into the kitchen to answer it.

"Hey, Billy! It's me!" It was Max.

"What you doing, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm home with Mom!" Max told him. "Hopper told us you were at the station, you should have waited for us!"

"Who is it?" Dustin demanded; he'd popped up by Billy's side like a troll and startled him.

"Jesus. Leave me alone," Billy told him, twisting the phone-cord around his wrist. "What happened with – "

“Who's that?” Max demanded too. “Is Steve there?”

“Yeah, him and Henderson, havin' a funeral for my coffee table.”

“What, are you *serious*? Without ME?” Max demanded at a level four in her hysteria. “That's not fair!”

Jesus God she was too much. Billy tried again: “What happened with your moms?”

“Oh, I don't know. We were there for forever! Mostly I was in the lobby, I think Mom's scared about going to court. She put out a restraining order, too.”

“Yeah? She go and bail my dad out?”

“*Please*,” Maxine scoffed at him. “I think his boss has to do it tomorrow or something, Mom has been storming around for like two hours packing up all his crap.”

Oh. Billy guessed that was good. “He comin' back there?”

“No way!”

“You know where he's gonna go?”

“Who gives a shit?” Max said flippantly; the phone line fuzzed over and then she squeaked. “I WASN'T CURSING, MOM!” she lied all loud. “Sorry,” she said to Billy. “She's right here being super – *oh my god, he's not even mad!*” she hissed.

Billy kept on wrappin' the phone cord around his wrist. “You gotta go?” he asked her.

“Uh, no,” Max said in a weird voice. “She just – what are you doing, are you and Steve going out or something?”

Jesus God. He kinda really wished she wouldn't mention Harrington when her moms was apparently right fuckin' there. “I dunno, probably.”

“Oh, well, can you – MOM, ARE YOU SERIOUS?” Max yelled her

head off; Billy pulled the phone away from his ear. “*I’m asking him!*”

“Askin’ me what?” Billy felt the real true slight terror for the second time today.

The phone-line crackled for a couple seconds like Max was walkin’ somewhere with the receiver. “God! She keeps trying to take the phone from me!” she told him all annoyed.

Christ. “You gotta go?” he asked her again.

“No, she’s just *standing here* like a freak-show! Can you – *I AM!* Could you hang out with the guys another night?” Max asked him. “Mom wants to know if you can come over here, she said we can eat dinner together.”

Billy didn’t say anything for a couple seconds. Over in the living room, Steve and Henderson were both staring at him. “Uh – yeah, I dunno,” he said finally.

“*Please?* It’ll be fine,” Max told him. “Your dad won’t show up or anything, he’s not even out of jail yet!”

“Why’s she want me to go there?”

Max huffed all loud. “Oh my god, why do you think?”

“Yeah, man, I don’t feel like havin’ her tell me off and shit.”

“She’s not going to – WHAT, I JUST ASKED HIM!” she shrieked her head off some more. “She feels really bad, she wants to see you! Can you just come over?” The line crackled again. “Mom said we can order something!”

“I don’t ... ” Billy felt real overwhelmed again; he didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t sure when he’d started caring so fucking much about what Susan thought about him.

There was no way that she hadn’t at least talked to his old man by now, even if she hadn’t run off to pay his bail or whatever. Billy didn’t want her to hate him or something, or say that Maxine couldn’t hang around him no more. Max could squawk all she wanted that

things were *fine* but Billy didn't know. He really didn't know. He said it again: "Yeah, I dunno."

"Please? It'll be fine, I swear!" He didn't answer right away so Maxine sighed loudly. "She doesn't care about – can you just come over here?"

"Kinda busy."

"We just ordered food!" Max told him. "*BILLY!*"

Jesus God. Okay. Billy told himself to stop being a fucking pussy; it couldn't be worse than his dad walkin' in yesterday. "Fine, I'll come over," he muttered into the phone.

"REALLY? Okay, great! Right now, okay?" Max said all excited. "*Pleeeeee*. She's being *so annoying*."

"Yeah, okay, okay. I'm goin'. See you in a few." Billy hung up. Steve and Dustin were still staring at him so he had to talk again. "I gotta go back home, Max and her mom wanna eat dinner with me."

"Oh, wow. Okay, that's cool." Harrington looked real surprised again, not in a bad way, Billy guessed. "I mean, that's – that's good, right? Uh, is your dad – "

"He's not over there," Billy said shortly.

"Oh. Okay. Right. So does she – "

"Steve, can we still get food?" Henderson interrupted him.

Steve rolled his eyes all annoyed again. "Yeah, I – we can still get food."

Billy let the cat out, and then the three of them trooped back out into the rain and went down the street to Steve's car. It only took about three minutes to get over to Sue's house. "Guess, uh, I shouldn't come in," Steve said, almost like it was funny or somethin'. Billy rolled his eyes; it wasn't funny. "What?" Steve said. "So what are you doing later, you think you'll stay over for a long time?"

“Yeah, I don't know, man. Sorry.” He really *didn't* know; he had no clue what the fuck he was gonna be walking into.

“Okay, well, I – ” Harrington made one of his cute faces – “sorry, I actually gotta go out to dinner with my mom tomorrow too, I probably won't be back til really late. Uh, we could – ”

“That's okay. Think I got El comin' over tomorrow to check on me,” Billy told him. “Wanna do Wednesday?”

“Sure, that sounds okay. Uh, I *guess* I can go two nights without you,” Steve said like a huge cornball; he grinned looking at the face that Billy made.

Henderson leaned up from the backseat, hovering annoyingly. “Steve, you can still hang out with me!”

Steve made a truly wonderful face and then hid it before Henderson could see. “Thanks, Dustin,” he said dryly.

Billy unclicked his seatbelt. “Okay, I gotta go.”

“Good luck!” Henderson told him.

“Oh, my god, he's going to be fine,” Steve said all annoyed.

“How do you know? You don't know what Max's mom is going to try to cook!” Ha.

Billy decided not to tell him that they were probably just going to get take-out (unless it was a trap or something); he could see himself gettin' stuck in the car talking to Henderson for ten more minutes. He opened his door up. “Later, man.”

“See ya! You'll be fine, call me later if you need me!” Harrington told him; he was still bein' Mr. Mom and Billy's little cheerleader, too. Billy tried not to feel too emotional or whatever. “Hey, have fun, okay?”

Yeah right. Billy grunted; Steve and Henderson drove off and Billy went up the driveway to meet his fate.

Susan didn't scream her head off at him that he was some huge pervert or chase him around tryin' to beat on him like Billy'd feared; she did fucking cry again which was nearly as bad. She was already frickin' teary-eyed when she opened up the front door.

"Oh, my god, Billy, your *face*," she said all upset. She gave him a hug and pulled him through the doorway.

Billy patted her back awkwardly and tried to pull away; it didn't exactly work. "Don't even hurt anymore," he lied.

"Oh, I can't believe this, I don't even know how – "

"Mom, come on!" Max exclaimed; she'd popped outta the kitchen or somewhere to come and save him. She peeled her moms off of Billy, then just gave him a hug too which wasn't exactly much better. She pulled back after a moment though. "Hey Billy!"

"Yeah, hi."

Susan frowned; she was peerin' through the opened front door. "Was that Steve?" she asked in a funny voice. "He could have come in."

"Uh, yeah, he had somewhere to be," Billy managed.

She closed up the door and stood there looking at him; Billy didn't know what to do so he looked around. The house looked the same as usual, crowded and a little messy. There was an old suitcase and a big pile of trash bags right by the door – Billy guessed that was his dad's crap like Max had been squawkin' about. "Are you all right?" Sue asked him.

"Yeah, I'm okay." He felt real scared that she was gonna hug him again or some shit – she was already grabbin' his arm again.

Max leaned over and intercepted her before she could. "Mom! Can you leave him *alone*?"

"I'm not doing anything to him!" Susan said loudly. She let go of Billy and wrapped her arms up around herself instead. "I'm so sorry about everything, Billy, I didn't know if you would want to come here. We just wanted to see you."

"We ordered food from Rino's, we got you a lasagna," Max put in.

"Did you eat yet?" Susan asked him.

"Uh, no. I just got outta work." Billy still felt awkward as fuck. "Can I sit down or whatever?"

"Of course!"

He went and sat down on one of the couches. Max and Susan settled in across from him and then they all just sat there starin' at each other and not talking; Billy didn't understand why the hell they'd wanted him to come over so bad. He still felt kinda nervous or something, and he didn't really know what-all Susan wanted him to say.

"You're making things weird," Max informed her moms.

"Thank you, Max, no I'm not." Susan smoothed her skirt down over her knees all proper; she kinda looked like she didn't know what to do either. She looked up at Billy. "Are you all right?" she asked again.

Jesus God. "Yeah, I'm good."

"*Mom!* Stop asking him!" Max yapped.

"Well, he doesn't *look* all right!" Sue snapped at her. She glanced over at Billy again; he guessed they were about to have some big conversation. "I just – Billy, I'm sorry, I just don't – understand how this all happened. I don't –"

Max made her fishface. "I *told* you what happened, I've been telling you all day! Hopper told you, and *Steve* told you, and –"

"That's not what I *meant*," Susan said; she was still lookin' at Billy. "Well, so I – I'm sure that Max told you that we went down to the

police station, I got a call yesterday at about five o'clock – ”

“Why'd you even send my dad over to my place?” Billy asked her. He guessed he wanted to know. He didn't really wanna be talkin' about all this shit again but he did wanna know.

“What?” Sue stared at him blankly. “I didn't *send him over* – “

“You coulda just called me, you wanted her to come home,” Billy told her.

“No, it's not – I, I don't care about that!” Susan said loudly; she was gettin' all flustered like she usually did even though nobody was yelling. Damn. “I didn't – “

“Sorry. I'm just askin' you.” His voice sounded weird again, he thought, too small or something. He *felt* small, he guessed. “Don't get mad at me.”

“Oh, my god!” Susan said all incredulous like Billy was bein' totally unbelievable or some shit. “I'm not *mad* at you!”

“Mom, stop yelling!” Maxine exclaimed.

“I'm not *yelling!*” Sue said even though she really was kinda yelling now. She fussed with her skirt some more and looked up at Billy again; her face had gone all red. “I'm not *mad* at you,” she said again.

“Okay.”

“This shouldn't have even *happened*, I didn't mean that I, I – thought it was your *fault*,” Susan told him. “I'm sorry, because I feel like ... I just don't ... your father, you know, he asked me about Max on Saturday, I told him she was at a, a sleepover! He was just ... “ She paused again.

“What, he start some shit with you?” Billy'd figured that had been what'd gone down.

“I don't *know*,” Susan said, kinda dismissively almost. She propped her elbows up on her knees and rested her chin in her hands; she looked like a little kid. “He always starts something with me, it

doesn't really matter. He got, you know, he got angry at me, he said that Max should be home more. So we got into it a little bit, but I thought that was finished, I didn't think he was going to try and – start anything with you kids. I was at *work* yesterday until they called me!” she told Billy. “I didn't think that he was really going to go over to your apartment, I would have – called you, or – “

“He *probably* just went over there to mess with Billy, and then saw me!” Max put in.

Billy leaned over and rubbed at the side of his face with a hand; he didn't say anything. He hadn't known that Sue wasn't even home yesterday or whatever. Now he was *definitely* glad that he hadn't let his dad take Max out; who knew what the fuck he'd planned to do with her.

Susan reached out and put her arm around Max. She was gettin' all teary again and it made Billy want to jump out the window. “I don't know what he would have done if he'd – “

“Mom, I'm fine!” Max yapped. She really did seem fine, even with her big bruise on her arm; Billy didn't understand it. His old man had been shakin' her around like a twig yesterday.

“I'm so sorry, Billy,” Sue told him again. “You should have waited for us today, I just wanted to talk to you. You didn't have to be there by yourself.”

She was makin' him feel all weird or awkward again or some shit – he'd really thought she would be ticked off at him. “Doesn't matter,” he said. “So you see my dad or what?”

“No, I – “ Sue looked all surprised. “Mr. Hopper thought that was a ... bad idea,” she said; Max made her fishface at her moms calling the chief *Mr. Hopper*. “I spoke to Neil on the phone last night – I guess they give you one phone call, he certainly used his.” That was so great. “He was going completely crazy for about three minutes, finally I just hung up on him.”

Billy was lookin' down at the carpet; it was so interesting. “He say a bunch of shit to you 'bout me?”

She hesitated for a moment so Billy guessed that meant it'd been pretty bad. "Well, he just ... he said that ... it, it doesn't really matter."

"He just walked in and started going totally nuts!" Max told her moms. "He was yelling at Steve *and* at Billy, they weren't doing even anything!"

"I didn't say – "

"They're *just* friends!" Max yapped. "It's totally not fair, Neil never even lets us hang out with anybody!"

Billy felt like total shit – she was lyin' for him again. It felt stupid to fucking try to hide it at this point: it didn't feel fair. He wasn't just gonna, like, stop seein' Harrington or whatever, even if Susan didn't like it. Not after everything that'd happened over the last six months, everything that'd happened over the last *two days*. He guessed he'd already decided that a while ago.

It was kinda scary to think about it. He and Steve had never really talked about tellin' people about what they were doing, or *if* they were gonna tell anybody, or how. Billy wasn't stupid and Harrington wasn't stupid, either – they didn't live in frickin' New York City or San Francisco. Not everybody needed to know, but some people did already. They couldn't just hide out in Billy's apartment for forever.

He guessed Susan probably knew about it anyway. She had to by now, after everything. "Yeah, he's not just my friend," Billy told her. "Sorry." Max looked at him with her blue eyes all wide. He added, "We were just sittin' around though."

Sue stared at him, too, for a long couple of seconds; Billy didn't know what she looked like. "That's not ... " she started, then stopped again. Her brow furrowed – she looked like a little kid again for a moment, kinda like Max. "Billy, I, I don't care about that. That's ... your business, you can do whatever you want. I'm – not like your father."

He didn't know what he'd been expecting her to say. Not that, he guessed. It felt like another weight comin' off him or something. "I know."

“Okay, but you *have* said stuff before,” Max put in.

“No I *haven't*!”

“Yes you did! You said – “

“It doesn't matter,” Billy said.

“Billy, I'm sorry if I've ever said something or made you feel like I – wouldn't approve or anything,” Susan told him like they was in a Lifetime movie. “I knew you two were friends, and I ... thought that maybe ... but I didn't think you were – well, it's, it's fine. I don't want you to feel like you can't tell me things, or that you can't come over here anymore. Max said that you were scared to talk to me.”

Max made her fishface again. “I didn't say *scared*!”

“I was thinking about this, you know,” Susan told him, “when you boys came over the other week. You could do a lot worse, I suppose. Steve seems like such a – ”

Jesus God. Billy kinda wanted to go out the window again. “Uhhh, yeah – we really don't need to get into it – ” he managed; really the last thing he ever wanted to do was talk about his fuckin' love life or whatever with his stepmom. He didn't know how you were supposed to do this shit.

“Steve seems like such a *what*, Mom?” Maxine asked like a horrible little gremlin.

“Jesus! Okay, enough!” Billy told her; Max grinned at him.

“All right, Max,” Susan said. She still had her arm around Max; she smoothed her hand down Max's shoulder a couple times. “I was just saying – well, that's okay, it doesn't matter.”

Billy tried to calm himself down. “So when's my dad comin' back here?” he asked Sue.

Susan sat up on the couch; she seemed a little startled by the topic change. “He's *not*,” she said. “I've put up with this for too long, and I shouldn't have – I, I don't care what he does. I've already started

packing his things, one of his coworkers can come and pick them up, or, or his manager. God knows he hasn't made any *friends* in this town. I know they had to call his job today – ”

“I hope he gets *fired*,” Max put in all gleeful.

Sue ignored her. “Mr. Hopper says that we can press charges against him, we have some time to think about it,” she told Billy. “I don't want you kids to have to – ”

The doorbell rang and the three of them all stared at it like freakshows. After another minute Billy got up to check, but it was just the delivery guy with their food. Max jumped up with some cash from her moms and pushed Billy out of the way so's she could pay.

“Jesus, can you not frickin' knock into me?” Billy asked her.

“Sorry!”

He kinda wondered if this was how it was gonna be for forever now, always lookin' over your shoulder every time the phone rang or somebody knocked on the door. He thought about Hank sayin' *Sometimes you gotta let people go*. How could you.

They got their dinners all set up and Sue let them eat on the couch; she was good like that. She rolled her eyes and didn't answer when Billy asked her if she wanted any money for the food.

Shit still felt weird and all but Billy guessed it was okay. He needed to eat, at any rate. Susan got up to get more sodas and Max put the TV on, almost felt like a normal night or something.

Susan talked to him a little more as they ate. “I don't really know what's going to happen with the house, everything's in your father's name,” she said to Billy. “I suppose we don't have to worry for right now, but I'm sure he's going to want us to – ”

“You guys can stay with me if you want,” Billy told her. He felt like a dumb asshole right after he said it but he just wanted her to know.

Susan gave him some kinda look. “Thank you, but I don't want to put you out. I think we'll be all right. We could – ”

"I'm just sayin'. If you wanted to."

"We can get a place if we need to, I'll figure something out."

"I wish he'd just give you the house, you pay more bills than he does," Max told her moms.

Sue kinda looked like Max was being funny. "Well, that'd be nice, wouldn't it?" she said lightly. "Unfortunately, I don't really think that that's an option. I don't know what we'd do anyway, I'd have to get a second job to make the mortgage – "

She already worked like fifty hours a week anyway. They shouldn't even have a fucking mortgage here: Billy's real mom had owned her parents' place outright in Cali, and then when she'd died, his old man had got it. Houses around here were pretty cheap, not like out on the coast – Billy was pretty sure that Steve's fancy fucking *car* had cost more than this little place. His old man should've had plenty of cash to pay it off in full. He didn't know if Sue knew all that, or if she'd even want to get into it with his dad.

"I can give you some of my money from the general store!" Max put in before Billy could say anything. "Mrs. Byers said I can still work twenty hours once school starts!"

"That's all right, Max. That's your money. I don't want you to worry about it." Susan picked a piece of ravioli out of Maxine's hair; Max made a face at her. "We could get an apartment, too, or go and stay with my sister – "

"What? No way! I don't *want* to go to Indianapolis, all my friends are *here*!" Max went off like she was a goddamn eight-year-old baby or something. Billy kinda felt like he should feel annoyed at her but he couldn't; she didn't understand. Bein' in Indianapolis without Sinclair or Wheeler Jr was better than being stuck here with his asshole dad. Hell, being in the middle of the fuckin' Sahara *with* Sinclair or Wheeler Jr was better than being stuck with his dad. "Mom! I thought you weren't even talking to Aunt Cindy anyway!"

Susan didn't answer her; she turned the TV up instead. Max made another face at her but Billy figured that meant they was done talkin'

about it.

He ate as much food as he could – shit from Rino's was expensive – and helped Sue put the dishes away in the kitchen while Max stole his seat and crashed out in front of the TV like a lazy fuck. “Nice shirt,” she whispered to him; Jesus God she was the worst. Somehow Billy restrained himself from pouring the rest of his soda onto her head, but just barely.

Billy scraped the plates off and Susan rinsed them; it didn't take too long. He still felt kinda nervous even just bein' alone in the kitchen with her, like she was gonna turn around and tell him what she *really* thought about him or whatever. She didn't, though. She kept lookin' at him kinda funny, but maybe that was just in his head.

He went back into the living room and sat down on the couch again next to Max; she barely made any room for him. It was past nine already and he thought that he should probably leave soon. He wasn't sure how to say it without Sue going off and making a big production over him again, though.

He didn't really feel like gettin' up and going – it was still raining outside, and he was tired as hell, and his arm hurt. Even though shit was terrible and he still felt weird as fuck, he guessed he felt comfortable here or whatever, especially with his old man gone. He liked his place just fine, and it was the best because it was his place. It felt familiar here, though, even if it wasn't home or whatever; he'd lived here for almost two years. He remembered thinkin' before that it wasn't too bad when his dad had been on the road and it was just him and the girls. It made him feel weird now, kinda lonely almost.

They watched a rerun of *Unsolved Mysteries* and then part of the ten o'clock news – the reporters were doin' some big story on this fat fuck out in Bridesburg who'd eaten nothing but McDonald's for four years and suffered a major heart attack. The headline said *Big Mac Causes a Big Fatality*. “Dustin in ten years,” Max muttered immediately like a total asshole; she cracked Billy's shit up.

“*Maxine!*” Susan said all aghast; Billy laughed some more. “Billy, could you not encourage her? You need to stop being so mean about that boy, he's a perfect gentleman.” Billy and Max both made horrible

faces at someone callin' Henderson a perfect gentleman. "I just saw him at the market with his mother. He's lost so much weight since we moved here."

"Billy's been training him to run track when school starts again," Max said, blabbing all of Billy's business like usual.

"I forgot that you did that, freshman year," Sue told him. That'd been the year that Max and her moms had officially moved in with them back in Cali. "I thought you did pretty well, you could have picked it up again out here."

Billy's old man had bitched his head off because there were too many black kids on the team back home; he'd been lucky as hell that his dad had even let him do basketball. He decided not to say that to Susan right now.

"Should probably go back home soon," he said instead; Susan stood up right away.

"Oh, it's so late, though," she said. "You could – stay the night if you wanted, I'll take you back home in the morning. I know Max has your old bed, but you could sleep on the couch."

Billy actually thought about it for a couple seconds; he really did. He even kinda missed Sue's terrible breakfast. "That's okay," he said. "I got stuff to do." He had to let the cat back in anyway; she'd prolly be in some kinda mood from gettin' rained on. Maybe he'd call Harrington or something too. He didn't *need* to call him but it'd be nice or whatever to talk to him.

"Okay. Well, I just – just wait one second." Susan reached out and touched his arm for a moment, then moved away. She had this weird nervous look on her face. "I ... there's one more thing. I was waiting to ... I – I have something for you."

Everything had been fine all night but Billy felt kinda scared again; the way Sue was lookin' made him feel real scared. He wondered if she was gonna take out a gun and shoot him or some shit, or if his old man was already tryin' to press charges against him. "What?"

"I just – hold on. Let me go and get – " Susan went over to where Billy's dad's bags were tossed in the entryway; she fussed about on the big dining-cabinet where they'd always tossed all their mail. "I was packing up some of your father's things, I went through – his dresser in the bedroom. I ... found some mail that he'd taken, it turns out my sister's been writing me for *six months*. And he had – these too. They were for both of you."

She came back holding a little stack of mail. She spread the letters out in her hands for a second, then handed them over to Billy. "I didn't want to ... give them to you while we were eating. I really didn't know that he – I, well, I thought you might want them."

Billy looked down at the letters and felt frozen – they were post-marked from back out in Cali, and he didn't even have to look at the return address to know who they was from. He recognized the handwriting right away; it was Tracey's.

"What, what is it? Is it a bill or something?" Max leaned over his shoulder like a goober and then gasped. "Oh my god, are you *SERIOUS?*"

"Maxine! You don't need to yell!" Susan told her.

"Oh, my god, Mom! How long has he *had* these?"

Billy just sat there like a dummy; after a moment he made himself shuffle through the letters. There were just three of them, really: two long envelopes, one addressed to him and then one for Max, too, and a big square greeting-card that had both their names on it. Billy handed Max's letter over to her and then made himself open up the card one – the envelope hadn't been opened or nothin', but the seal had been peeled away all careful. Billy's dad was real smart like that.

"I'm so sorry, Billy," Susan told him. "I didn't know that she had written to you. I would never have – I just thought maybe you'd want them now."

"Yeah, thanks," Billy managed. He kind of wanted to go out the window again. Wouldn't kill him or anything but then he wouldn't have to deal with this fucking shit. So much had happened in just a

day, and he hadn't thought about Trace at all. Why would he.

He pulled the card out and looked at it. It was some cutesy Christmas card with Scooby-Doo on the front; just looking at that stupid shit made Billy want to cry or something in two seconds. He opened the card up and two pieces of paper fell out.

Max grabbed at them right away. "MAN, COME ON!" Billy roared.

"I'M JUST LOOKING!" she yelled back at him at a level eight; they fussed with each other for a moment. Max poked at his side a little and edged one of the folded-up notes back against the envelope. "Um ... this one's for you, too."

"Yeah, great." He closed the card up again and put it back in its envelope.

Max stared at him incredulously; she was way too close to him right now. "What, you're not going to read them?"

"Maybe later." He felt like he was going to fucking puke or pass out or something. Jesus fuck. He didn't know why –

"But you – "

"I gotta go home anyway, I got shit to do," Billy told her. Max rolled her eyes at him and turned back towards her mail.

"I'm so sorry," Susan said again; she was still standing and looking at him. Max was hunched over already, tearing into her letters, and Billy was just sitting on the couch like a dumb zombie or some shit. "I know that you ... Tracey was such a sweet girl, I know that you – cared about her. I can't *believe* that he – if I had known, I would have given them to you right away. I don't know if you ever tried to call her or anything – "

"That's okay," Billy said; he hadn't anyway.

"God, this is from a *year* ago," Max mumbled without looking up.

God. Fuck. It was so great. Billy just sat there like an asshole some more. "Thanks for these." He stood up abruptly, almost knocking into

Susan. “Uh, yeah, I really gotta go.”

“Do you want a ride back? It's so late.”

His mind was kind of spinning or something – all he could think about were the stupid fucking letters in his hand. “Yeah, sure.”

“Max, are you staying here?”

She didn't answer for a moment; finally she looked up from where she was already engrossed in Tracey's note. “Um, I – guess. Are you going to be okay?” she asked Billy.

“Jesus, I ain't your frickin' toddler,” Billy told her. Max made a face at him.

Sue got her purse and her keys together while Billy stood there like a dumb asshole some more; she spent a while packin' up the rest of the food for him to take home. Max had to finally get up off the couch to help her moms find her shoes and to say goodnight to Billy.

Off into the rain they went; Susan drove him home in her crappy Explorer. Neither of them talked too much. Billy'd thought he'd feel weird or nervous in the car with her, but he still didn't feel too much of anything: was kinda like yesterday again, as if he wasn't really in his body. His brain felt all scrambled, like he couldn't think clearly or somethin'.

Billy held Tracey's stupid letter and her stupid card in his lap – he was trying not to wrinkle 'em up too much or whatever. Shit. He didn't know what the goddamn hell he was supposed to do with this shit now. He almost felt fucking *angry* or something, angry like he'd been at her two years ago, and that wasn't how he was tryin' to be. He didn't know who the fuck even he was supposed to be angry at anymore.

He bit his lip really hard and then twisted the letters up anyway, trying not to freak the total fuck out. Susan glanced over at him a couple times all concerned, but Billy guessed she just assumed he was ticked off about his dad. God. Shoulda just left this shit at Susan's place, he figured, but he didn't want Maxine to snoop through all his

shit and read them.

“Are you going to be all right?” Sue asked him once she'd pulled up in front of his place. “You know you can come by and see us whenever, Max can stay with you whenever you want.”

“Don't make me fuckin' cry, Sue,” Billy warned her.

Susan actually *did* look all teary again – it was fucking awful. “I'm so sorry about all of this,” she told him. “I should have done so much more for you. You know I love you, Billy, you're just like my – you know that, right?”

Christ he wanted to fucking die again or something; she was bein' way too much. Just looking at her teary eyes and her narrow face and her frizzy hair that looked like Max's made his chest feel too tight, like he was gonna explode again or some shit.

“YeahIknow,” he muttered; he hoped she didn't want him to fucking say it back or whatever. He almost wanted to chew on his nails or some shit, felt like Harrington. “Thanks.”

“I know you hate it when anyone says anything nice to you,” Susan told him like she had him totally figured out; Billy felt cranky. “You always did such a good job with Max. When she was little she always wanted a brother or sister.”

“She's a good kid,” Billy said like a moron. Well Max was a fuckin' troll really but he guessed that was what you said.

“You are too,” Susan told him.

Jesus. She was making him feel real embarrassed again; Billy sat forward and unclicked his seatbelt. “Thanks for not cookin' tonight, means a lot to me.”

“Oh, my *god*.” Susan wiped her eyes off. “Goodnight, go away now.” She made him laugh. “Go and get some rest, maybe I'll see you again this week.”

“Yeah, if you want.”

He got back up into his apartment and turned some lights on. It was weird to have the place all empty for once, without Steve or Max or one of the creepy kids hangin' around to bug him. Even so he guessed he wanted to be alone.

Devil Cat was standing around on the balcony and getting rained on; Billy knew he'd forgotten to leave the window open for her. He let Chewy in and she trotted off to his room right away to probably ruin his bed with her muddy paws.

He'd been real tired all day and he'd been real tired at Sue's place too but now he felt kinda restless or something. It was only past ten and Billy didn't know what the fuck he was supposed to do with himself all night. He put his food away in the fridge and checked the door twice to make sure that it was locked. He took a shower, finally, for a long time, and then sat around on the couch for a while, staring at the TV turned off. He probably looked like a fucking serial killer or some shit. Maybe not because he just had a pair of Harrington's dorky pajama-bottoms on.

Finally he got up and went on into his room. Chewy was sprawled out on the bed lickin' rainwater off herself; she paused and gave him this long look as he sat down like she knew exactly what kinda prick he was. Billy pushed her off his pillow.

He sat around on his bed, too, holding Tracey's fucking notes and looking at them. The one letter was from way back in the fall and the card was from this past Christmas; Billy didn't know why the fuck she'd sent him a goddamn Christmas card all nice like he hadn't done a bunch of awful shit to her. Maybe she didn't wanna just put Max's name on it or whatever. But then she'd wrote him that note in there too. He didn't get it.

Fuck but he didn't want to deal with this shit right now – he didn't want to deal with *her*. He'd spent so much time feeling like shit about Tracey last year and he'd spent so much time tryin' not to think about her that it'd almost worked; now he almost never thought about her.

That made him feel like fucking shit too – obviously she had some shit she wanted to say to him. He'd never even called her or nothin'. He'd been too scared and pissed off after the way he'd treated her and

then they'd left right away; he'd just figured that was it for them. Now he was too fucking scared to read a goddamn letter that she'd sent him a goddamn *year* ago, and he just really didn't want to deal with it. He didn't know what the fuck Tracey even wanted to say to him after so long, however fucking long it'd been when she'd sent that shit out.

Shit. He put the letters down next to himself, then picked them up again; God he really didn't wanna even fuckin' look at them. He guessed that maybe he wasn't exactly the greatest at confronting his *problems*. Shit. Not that she was a problem or whatever. *He* was the problem.

He didn't really understand why she'd be writing to him anyway. Max maybe but not him. It didn't make any sense. Prolly she was still real pissed off at him – shit but it made him feel so awful, thinkin' of her being mad after so long. He'd always figured she'd just forget about him; he fucking wished she had.

After a while he stood up and went over to his dresser and dug around in the bottom drawer. He still had that file-folder that Hop had given him – well, that he'd asked for, really. It was full of shit about that kid that those people had used to get to El, that girl they'd gotten killed. It'd been over two months now and Billy still hadn't taken it out or looked at it at all; it was another thing that he didn't want to deal with. He didn't know why he'd asked the chief for that shit anyway, wasn't like he could fucking do something.

He stuffed Trace's letters in the drawer too and tossed his jeans on top of 'em. Even after he'd shut everything away, he just stood there, staring down at the drawer for a while. Felt like they were gonna fly out to fucking bite him or burn him or something.

Billy went back over to his bed. He turned the lights off and then laid there on top of his blankets for a long time, trying not to think about shit. It didn't exactly work.

Somehow he didn't fucking die overnight from intense guilt or whatever; Billy woke up late and ate the rest of Max's cereal out on

the balcony, talkin' to the cat.

Work was okay, more like a normal day. Hank didn't ask him any more shit about his old man and Billy felt relieved. They fixed the Charger together and spent most of the afternoon working on Billy's car; Hank said he could probably have it back by the weekend. Billy left at past five and then he got to go back home and get cheered up by Eliane – Hopper brought her over right after her tutoring session.

Jane spent a while huggin' him which made Billy feel pretty weird on account of the chief being there staring at them and all. After that he got to stand around for about ten minutes smoking and making small-talk with Hopper: Billy said he'd missed the baseball game on Sunday and Hop said he hadn't missed much. He spent a while telling Billy about it anyway as El hovered by his side, lookin' impatient and tuggin' on his shirt-sleeve.

After that it felt like they'd both ran out of things to say; Billy guessed that Hop kinda had some kinda word-limit too. The chief looked pretty weird leanin' against the counter in the little kitchen, like he didn't belong there too or something. He was wearing another awful Hawaiian shirt and Billy was tryin' hard not to look directly at him; his vision was already blurring with how bad it was. "You doin' any better today?" Hop asked him.

"Guess so."

"Did you, ah, see Max and her mother?"

"Yeah, I ate dinner with 'em last night."

"Oh. Good. Hey, that's good," Hop said. "They'll be okay." He cleared his throat. "Got your papers put through, I got a copy for ya. Think your dad's, uh, stayin' at this motel out in Reddington, he shouldn't bother you anymore."

That was like an hour away. "Okay."

"Let me know if you see him around, you shouldn't have to," the chief told him. "I'd just, you know, I'd keep an eye out for a couple days. Lock your door or, ah, I dunno, keep the kid with ya." He

waved a hand over towards Elijane.

“I *said* I wasn't going to do anything,” Jane said all grouchy.

“Yeah, okay.” They exchanged some kinda weird glance between themselves, then Hop looked back over at him. “Sure you don't mind her stayin' here for a while?”

“It's cool, I ain't doing shit. Stuff,” Billy amended.

“I can pick her up later, I should be back around ... “ he paused for a second; Billy didn't know why “... uh, maybe ten or so.”

“He has a date with Mrs. Byers,” Elijane informed him.

“Ha, ha.” The chief made a truly wonderful face and took a big drag offa his cigarette; he held the smoke in for a long time. “It's not a date, all right? I'm not fourteen years old, I'm just going out to dinner.”

Mrs. Byers got a night off work about once every two weeks. Billy was pretty sure that it was a date. “Yeah, you can go, man. We're good here.”

“All right.” The chief went over closer to Jane and messed her hair up; she just stood there placidly. “Listen to what Billy tells ya, don't eat all his frickin' food.”

“I won't!”

“Don't have nothin' anyway.” He'd needed to go shopping like three days ago – he and Max and Harrington had never gotten themselves to the store on Sunday.

The chief left and then Billy and Jane sat around on the couch for a couple minutes. She was just lookin' at him in her weird scrutinizing way, makin' him feel all weird and scrutinized. “You eat dinner yet?” Billy asked her.

She shrugged a little. “I had a Hot Pocket earlier,” she said.

Billy sighed at Hopper in his head for a million years. “Yeah, we can

go out later.”

“That's okay.” She was still starin' at him; her eyes narrowed and her little face looked real serious. “You got hit again.”

“Guess I did.” Billy rubbed the side of his face. Now that it'd been a couple days, the bruise was in full form, and he guessed it did look pretty bad: fading blue-purple, and the corner of his eye was still kinda bloodshot.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yeah, a little bit,” he admitted finally.

“Jim said you hit your dad back.”

That was an understatement. “Kinda beat him up.”

“Did it feel good?” she asked him.

Billy thought about it. “Yeah, felt good,” he said. “Later, not so much.” She nodded all solemn. “Hey, you wanna watch *Thundercats*?” Billy asked her.

“Yep.”

They watched the TV for a while and Billy asked her about the books she'd been readin' for her class; he hadn't really seen her too much since she'd stayed over a couple weeks ago. At just past seven o'clock the phone rang – it was Will calling him from the movie theater. Seemed like everybody was fucking checkin' up on him, but it was okay if it was Byers.

He talked to the kid for a couple minutes as El watched the TV; Will was hidin' out in the back office on the manager's phone. “I wanted to come over yesterday and see you, I'm sorry, I have to pick up all of Lily's shifts while she's on vacation this month,” Wills told him all hushed. “My mom told me what happened. Are you okay and everything?”

“Yeah, I'm good. Thanks for callin' me.”

"Well, I feel really awful, I thought about you and Max all day," Will said like a little sweetheart or whatever. "I had so much fun on Saturday, and I – um ... it always feels like whenever something good happens, something bad has to happen right after. Sorry it happened to you." He was all wise and shit.

"My dad's been waitin' about my whole life to throw down with me, don't worry 'bout it."

"I, I guess so," Will said in a weird voice; Billy guessed that wasn't like real reassuring or whatever.

"Party was still good though."

"Yeah, it was awesome!" Will yapped. "Um, my mom's probably going to come over and bug you guys and bring you a bunch of food," he told Billy after another second. "Sorry about her, she likes doing that. Mike sprained his ankle once falling out of my treehouse, and she made the Wheelers like fifty casseroles."

"Oh yeah? Didn't know you had a treehouse."

"Uh, I mean, we don't really use it anymore," Will said all fast. "I'm not, like, a little kid or anything." He was too funny; Billy chewed on his lip so's he wouldn't smile. "If you or Max or Steve want to see a movie this week, I can get you guys in. *Slaughterhouse* just came out in 3-D."

Harrington would just love that shit. Also, Billy needed to call him; maybe he'd try after Jane went home. "Yeah, sounds cool."

"Well ... I guess that's it," Wills said. "I'll let you go, I just wanted to call and let you know I was thinking of you."

Jesus God Billy felt all embarrassed again; he didn't know how to deal with people saying that kinda shit to him. "Uh, thanks, kid," he said like an idiot. "You wanna talk to El or somethin'?"

"Oh. Um, I – sure!" Billy handed the phone over. The kids blabbed away until a little before eight, when Maxine came in all laden down with a buncha grocery bags to make Billy dinner.

“EL!” Max swooped over to her right away; Billy guessed he was back to bein' chopped liver.

“Sorry, I have to go!” Elijane told Wills. She hung up the phone and the girls squawked amongst themselves, grabbing hands and all. Maxine had to spend about twenty minutes detailing to Jane all the shit that'd happened and how Billy had *totally* kicked his dad's ass; she made him sound all brave and shit. Billy didn't feel the need to point out that he'd actually been scared out of his goddamn mind.

He didn't mind the girls yappin' to each other even though he and El had had about three things to say to each other. He guessed he didn't really need to talk to her in the same way or whatever.

After a while Max turned and fixed him with a look. “Did you look at Tracey's stuff yet?” she demanded. Elijane stared between them; she knew who Tracey was.

Billy should have known she'd fuckin' start up with him right away – he'd been trying not to think about this shit all day. “Man, don't bug me about it.” Max kept on lookin' at him. “No, I didn't fucking read them yet,” he told her deliberately.

“What, did you thrown them out or something?” Max asked. She got one of her scary looks on her face.

“Jesus, I didn't throw them out. Don't worry 'bout what I'm doing.”

“It's just a stupid letter, Billy, you don't have to be *scared* of it!” Max yapped. “She obviously wanted to talk to you!”

“The hell you think she's got to say to me?” Billy asked her.

“I – I don't know!” Max was just frowning at him and she looked unhappy now. “I mean, she said – ”

“Maybe I don't wanna fucking deal with that shit,” Billy snapped; he was cursin' way too much again.

Max's face fell even more. “She didn't say anything bad to me about it!”

"Oh yeah, forgot you were so involved." She frowned like he'd hurt her or somethin'.

"It's probably nothing *bad*, why would she even bother?"

Christ but Maxine was a piece of work; Billy couldn't see how the fuck it *couldn't* be something bad. "I'm gonna fuckin' read 'em, okay? Can you just leave me alone for a goddamn minute?"

"*Fine.*" Max hunched her shoulders and flopped back against the couch in a big sulk, then sat up again almost immediately. She stared at him with her stupid eyes all wide. "But I just – was there anything else for me in the card?"

Billy didn't answer her for a moment; he didn't really get what she was talking about. "Nah, what d'you mean? You seen it." She didn't answer him. "I gave you the goddamn letter."

"*Nevermind,*" she snapped, still all sulky. Billy wondered again if he'd ever understand any chick.

Shit got kinda awkward after that with Maxine all ticked off at him. After a couple moments of glaring she grabbed up Elijane and the girls went over to the kitchen to make dinner. Billy felt like total shit – Max was obviously pissed at him again and he didn't want her to be; she was gettin' him all screwed up again.

Even now, he could just about fucking *feel* Tracey's goddamn letters, burning a hole through the dresser in his room. He felt mad, too, and he didn't know at who. Himself he guessed. Or fucking Max, she was always in his goddamn business. Billy didn't give a shit if she wanted to read whatever Trace'd wrote her and send her a goddamn novel back; that didn't have fuck-all to do with him.

He was being a fucking pussy again – it was just a goddamn letter. Two letters but whatever. Maybe he owed it to Trace to read 'em; he could at least do that. Harrington had said before when they'd been fighting *If your girlfriend showed up here, you'd be all over her* but that wasn't really true because Billy was a fucking coward. It felt weird as fuck to think about Steve when he was thinkin' about Tracey too, was like he couldn't handle it or something. It even made his fucking

stomach hurt; there was still a part of him that didn't want to think about Trace at all.

Okay, well. He was fucking thinking about her anyway. Billy sat there for as long as he could stand it, thinking about her and gettin' pissed off. Finally he stood up and turned the TV off; Jane and Max looked over at him from the kitchen. "All right, okay, I'm going to go *fucking* read them, you happy?"

"*Really?*" Max asked him all excited; Billy felt even more ticked off.

"Yeah, don't come into my fuckin' room," he warned her. "Just don't burn the place down, all right?"

"We're just making mozzarella sticks!"

Jesus God. Some fucking dinner. Billy stalked off into his room.

He got the letters out again and sat on his bed and looked at them some more like an idiot or a serial killer. The stupid lava lamp made weird patterns across the paper but he wasn't gonna fucking get up to put another light on.

He felt kind of scared again or whatever, and that made him feel fucking *stupid*. It was just that he'd never had to deal with this shit before: everything had happened so fast and then they'd moved away in like three weeks. Even if Trace still fucking wanted him dead, it wasn't like Billy didn't already know what he'd done – there wasn't any shit she could say that would surprise him or make him feel worse. He could just read it, he thought, and then if she still hated him, he'd know for sure, and he could really be done with it. Obviously she'd fuckin' hate him. He turned the papers over in his hands.

The earlier letter, the actual letter and not the card, was dated near the start of last September; it was almost weird to see the date. That'd been nearly a year after they'd moved out to Hawkins so he guessed that Trace had spent all that time bein' pissed off at him and thinking up all the shit she wanted to say.

He just looked at the letter for a couple minutes, felt like he was

gonna get sick or something – he almost got up and put it back in his drawer again. Maybe he'd just throw it out, he thought for the hundredth time. He didn't do that, though. Of course he wasn't gonna do that shit.

The envelope hadn't been torn or nothing but the seal peeled over right away – Billy couldn't tell if his old man had opened it up to read it or not. If it was something real bad and his dad had read it, Billy didn't understand why his old man hadn't thrown it in his fucking face. His dad would love that, making Billy feel like total shit over Trace readin' him the riot act.

The note wasn't too long or nothing anyway: about a page front-and-back, a couple paragraphs in Tracey's flowery loopy handwriting. Just looking at that shit made Billy want to go right out the window again, and here he'd thought he'd been fuckin' feeling *better* about her lately. Seeing her writin' made it feel like she was right here looking at him or something. It almost hurt real bad; everything blurred over for a couple seconds. He took a moment to calm himself down and made himself read it.

Billy,

I'm not sure if you want to hear from me, but I hope it's okay that I'm writing this to you. I hope your jerk of a father won't read it or anything. I don't know if she ever told you, but Max came over right before you left and gave me the address to where you guys were moving to. I feel awful because I never sent her anything, and I keep thinking about her. I've been thinking about you too.

Well I know you were really pissed off at me, but that's okay because I was pissed off at you too. I was REALLY pissed off at you for a long time, but it seems pretty stupid now. I guess I can say that, because it's been a while, and here I still am. When Max came to see me, she said sorry for telling her mother about us. She didn't mean for it to get like that so I hope you aren't being a nine-inch prick her. I feel like total crap because I wasn't thinking about her at all. I was mad at you, and I think it kind of made me feel mad at her, too. I sent her something, too, about a week ago, so I hope she forgives me. If you guys were still here, she'd be starting

at the high school with us! We could have bugged the total crap out of you, remember your basketball tryouts in eighth grade? I guess what made me think of her was that all the freshman had spirit week this first week, and I bet she'd have had a lot of fun. Maybe they do that at your new school too.

I think I've started this about four times now, but I'm out of notebook paper, so this is what you get. You know I knew that your asshole dad kicked the total snot out of you last year. I know he did it because I saw you limping around at school. I was so mad at you because you could have come to see to me and we could have made it all right. You know we always made it all right so I don't really get why you were so angry at me. I feel like I still don't know what happened, because you and I could always talk to each other, Billy. It's not like I would have wanted to have a kid or something either, can you imagine? Anyway, I guess that problem solved itself. Ha-ha, I can make jokes now. But I guess I felt really awful at the time. You made me feel pretty awful. Even after I found out that you guys were moving, and then after you left, I guess I thought maybe you'd call me or something. I guess I really wanted you to call me. I know that you were going through it with your father, but I felt like I needed you. You made me feel really stupid. I spent a while being mad about that, too.

Well, it's been a really long time, and I guess I just want you to know that it's okay, and that I'm not mad anymore. I feel a little crazy or silly writing this, because it's been a while, and I don't know if you still feel bad, or if you were thinking of me, or if you miss me at all. It's crazy to think that it's been almost a whole year since we last seen each other. I guess I like to think that you're bored as crap in your new town, and maybe you'd been thinking about me, because I'm thinking about you. I miss you a whole lot, if you want the truth, and I'm not mad anymore. I guess I like to think that I know you a little, too, and I don't want you to feel bad anymore. Sometimes the WEIRDEST stuff makes me think about you, and I hate thinking about you feeling bad.

I hope that you're okay and all, and that you're doing all right. I guess if this doesn't get returned to me, then I'll know your jerk dad didn't kill you yet! I guess I'd just like to know that you're okay.

If you want to know about me, or if you're still reading, I'm doing pretty well, I guess. I made the cheerleading squad last year and I guess it's good

that you're about three days away, because that would have been so fun for you! Jack went out for football too, and we had our first game already. It made me feel kind of silly or down or something, because I kept thinking about all the funny stuff you would have said if you were here. We got these new bleachers last spring and everyone feels very hoity-toity at the home games. I had to buy two uniforms, and I almost wasn't able to, but Aunt Mia lent me some money. I got a job at that curtain store over on Allegheny, you know the one we always said looked haunted? So far it doesn't seem haunted, but my boss is totally for SHIT like you like to say. We only get about one customer a day, and it's pretty boring. My mom has been doing really well lately too. We'll see how long that lasts. I remember how you used to keep your cash under your mattress like a little freaker, did you ever open up a bank account?

I guess I don't really know what I'd like to write about. This feels pretty funny, I haven't seen you in almost a year and I feel like I'm talking like you in this letter. Writing like you I guess. Me and Jack miss your commentary at lunch. You remember when you made the milk come out of his nose? I haven't been able to do it yet. Without you, I've been getting a lot less detention, but the year's just started!

Well I still feel silly. I just keep thinking about you and I wanted you to know that I'm not mad anymore and that it's okay. I know it's not like you're going to pop up here but it's okay. It's been a while, but I keep thinking about you feeling bad and I hate it. I'm really doing okay, and my mom hasn't been too bad or anything. She didn't even find out about the whole thing. I guess I just really miss you Billy and you know I love you. I'm not writing that because I want to get back with you or anything, but I hope you know it. I love you and you know, you weren't just my boyfriend, you were my best friend too. It really sucks without you here. So it'd be great if you if you wanted to write me back I just want you to know that.

I hope that you're doing all right and that Max is all right too. I hope you guys are still friends with each other and that you're not being too mean to her. She really needs somebody. Well, I wrote her a ton of stuff, and maybe she'll tell you about it. I really hope you guys are doing all right. I really miss you both and I hope you know it's okay. I bet you met another girl by now and that's okay too. If you ever want to write me back and tell me about your senior year that'd be cool. I hope you have a great year. I

guess that's all I want to say.

Yours in crime,

Tracey

Billy read the letter two times and then put it down again. He almost felt like he was shaking; he felt kinda blank or something. He didn't really understand, like it was a joke or something that he wasn't getting. He didn't really understand how it could be a joke. He leaned over and picked up the other paper to read before he started totally freaking out or some shit. Shit. Fuck.

The second note a lot shorter and it was the one that'd been in the stupid Scooby-Doo card; Billy spent a while just looking at the front of it, was all glittery. The Mystery Machine was all decked out in holiday lights, and there was smoking comin' out of the window. He bet Tracey'd gotten a big kick out of that. He opened that up and pulled the little note out of it.

Hey Billy!

I'm not sure if you ever got my last letter, but I sent you something a couple months ago, Max too. I never got anything back from her either, so I figured maybe she was still too ticked off after not hearing from me for so long.

I was also thinking that maybe your dad or Mrs. Mayfield didn't want you guys getting some big notes from me. I figured that maybe if I put this in a greeting card they'd give that to you at least. It's cute, right? This was the only card that didn't have Scrappy on it. What happens in the van stays in the van. :) Oh, I finally moved in with Aunt Mia (long story, but it's great here!) so my new address is here on the envelope.

It's probably stupid of me to be writing you again, but I guess I just wanted to. My other letters didn't get returned to me, so maybe you guys read them anyway. It's okay if you don't want to send me anything big back, but really I just want to know that you're doing okay. Everything got

really screwed up last year, but I'd like to think that you're not angry anymore and I just want you to know that I'm not mad either. I don't feel like writing a big thing about it now but it's all right. Jack told me the other month that he gave you a real hard time before you moved away and I want you to know I didn't tell him to do that.

I know it's been a while but I guess since it's the holidays coming up, I've been thinking about you again. It's been too long for me to be angry or upset anymore so I just hope you've had a really good Christmas! I bet you're going around with a bunch of new people by now, so maybe you went to a party like I did for New Years. I keep thinking about two Christmases ago when we went to that big mall out in Santa Monica and Max got us kicked out of the record store. She never got her Joy Division shirt!

I wrote Max a note too and that necklace I sent is for her too. I know you hate getting presents so I didn't get you anything. It's silly anyway. Any time I see a mood ring, I think about her at the arcade. She must have spent about ten dollars trying to win that stupid ring. I'd never seen one on a necklace before and I knew right away she had to have it.

Well, if you're still living at home I hope you get this letter and I hope you read it. I hope that your dad isn't giving you too hard of a time anymore but I bet that he probably is. I like to think of you being happy so I hope he's not too awful to you or to Max.

I guess that's all I want to say. I miss you, and I hope you're doing okay. You can write me back if you want, but if not it's okay.

Your friend,

Tracey

Billy read both letters over again and then put them down. He kinda wanted to cry again or something; apparently that was just a thing that happened now. He was gettin' himself all worked up again, and he wanted to ... shit, he didn't know. Whatever he felt like seemed as if it was too big or too much for him – he felt like fucking dyin' or something. He'd thought for sure that Trace would hate him, still

hated him, and here she just wanted to know if he was *okay*. He almost couldn't believe it; he was such a fucking asshole.

All the shit that she'd wrote had made him feel real crazy or silly too. Not just the crap about how mad she'd been at him, because he knew that already. Not that he'd made her feel stupid, or that he'd made her mad at Max, too, or even that awful shit about her needing him or him bein' her best friend, because he'd know that too, but all the other crap she had written, just everything else.

He'd tried so hard for so long to not think about Tracey that it was almost like she'd stopped bein' real – it was weird as hell to picture her now, going on with her life and doing normal shit: cheerleading and asking her aunt for money, going to a party without him, or bein' at school and gettin' a job. Of course she'd fucking do all those things. He could just about *see* her puttin' her time in at the haunted curtain joint, real bored, leaning against the counter in one of her faded blouses and staring out the window, watchin' the cars pass by on the busy street outside.

It made him really miss her or whatever, and it hurt real bad, felt like somebody stabbin' him. He couldn't believe she'd really finally moved in with her aunt; he wondered what kinda shit had gone down. *I bet you met another girl by now and that's okay too.*

Jesus Christ. It made him feel too fucking crazy, reading all that crap two days after his dad had nearly killed him for bein' with a guy, bein' with Steve. There was so much shit he was never gonna get to tell her now: it didn't feel fair. He didn't need to give her a new reason to hate him or feel bad about him – part of him didn't understand how she didn't already know about him.

He tried to remember what he'd even been doing last Christmas when she'd been writin' to him and thinkin' about him: he was pretty sure he'd been fagging around after Harrington like he usually was, smoking weed and playin' records. Laying out on the roof and making a stupid fucking bet with Max. Listening to the college radio and going to the movies, not thinking about Trace at all.

Shit. Fuck. He read the last little note again and tried to calm himself down. He guessed Maxine was all bent out of shape because she

hadn't gotten her stupid necklace or whatever – probably hadn't been worth too much anyway, but he was pretty sure his old man had hawked it or tossed it. Maybe it was still in the house somewhere; he'd have to ask Susan about it.

Billy folded his letters up and sat around some more until he felt normal again, as normal as he was gonna get tonight, anyway. He still felt like he wanted to fucking cry or some shit; he had to keep wiping his face off, was too warm in his room. Maybe he'd just stay in here anyway, think about shit until he fell asleep. He could just think about Trace for a little bit; maybe that would be okay. Hop was comin' back soon to pick El up, but Billy was pretty sure the girls would be –

Out in the kitchen, the smoke alarm went off real loud. “UH, BILLY?” Maxine yelled in a high-pitched voice like a total asshole. “DON'T GET MAD, BUT I THINK YOU NEED A NEW FRYING PAN!”

Jesus fucking Christ. So much for thinkin' about shit. Billy got up and threw his door open; there was a bunch of smoke billowin' away in the sink. “MAX, ARE YOU FUCKING SERIOUS?”

Early on Wednesday they had another earthquake as he and Dustin were off on their morning run together – Henderson almost fell over in the middle of the fuckin' street and projectile-vomited up a buncha black crud like he was in the *Evil Dead* or some shit.

Billy dragged the kid over to the curb and sat with him until he felt okay; Jesus God he and Harrington got so dramatic about this shit. They sat there for so long that he almost felt kinda concerned – he was pretty sure this was the longest the kid had ever gone without talkin'.

“Hey, you all right?” Henderson didn't answer him; he put his head in his hands like a dramatic bitch. Billy wondered if he was gonna have to call in late to work or some shit.

Finally Dustin sat back up and put his sweaty baseball cap back on his head. "Okay, I'm fine, I'm good." He wiped his mouth off like a gross person.

"The fuck did you even eat, man?" Billy asked him.

"What?" Henderson was staring at him like Billy was speakin' some kinda brand-new language. "I, I don't know, I guess I drank too much soda."

Billy tried not to make a face; it was seven-fifty in the goddamn morning. "Okay, if you say so." They parted ways and Henderson wandered off back home and Billy headed on into work.

At the shop he got his car back – Hank had stayed late last night finishin' up the rest of the work on it. The driver's-side door still had a big dent runnin' along the length of it since Billy'd ran out of money to replace it, but they'd slowly been fixing up the rest of the cosmetic shit on it. Trunk wasn't crumpled-up no more and the tail-lights were fixed and he had new upholstery on the seats in the back finally; almost felt like a brand-new ride.

Once he was done for the day he drove himself down to the arcade to pick up Maxine. The chief had shown up last night about two seconds after Billy'd finished hollerin' at the girls for ruining his best frying pan; he'd given Max a lift home to her moms so Billy hadn't had to deal with any more crap from her, but she'd asked him if she could come over for a while tonight. He took up two spaces in the parking lot and sat around smoking until she burst out all excited with Elijane and Wheeler Jr and Sinclair in tow.

The kids appropriately flipped shit over his car for a couple minutes. Max and El looked all pleased and junk. "I can fix the radio again," Elijane told him all critical like she was his little mechanic; Billy grinned at her.

Max reached out and shoved Wheeler Jr in the back with both hands, not gently. "Hey, *Mike*, do you have anything you want to say to my brother?"

Wheeler turned red and got one of his amazing shit-faces on; each

week he looked worse and worse. He squinted and leaned over awkwardly into the driver's-side window to look at Billy. "Um, I'm glad your dad didn't kill you or whatever," he mumbled in a great pain.

Holy hell Billy felt his heart grow three sizes or whatever. He put a hand up against his chest. "Jesus, thanks, Mikey." Wheeler Jr made an even more terrible face.

He'd only been expecting Max, really, but the rest of the Creepy Kid squad clambered into his car anyway. Billy drove them down Dearborn and dropped Wheeler and Eliane off for the chief to deal with, then took Sinclair and Max back to his apartment.

"I'm eatin' dinner with Hank next week, you gotta come with me," Billy told her as they trooped up the steps in the hallway. He'd gotten all trapped earlier sayin' thanks for his car and then hadn't known how to beg off when Hank had said Billy could come over to watch the playoffs. He assumed it was dinner and shit too since Hank was always eatin'.

"Really?!" Max said all excited. "Sure, what night?"

"Next Thursday, clear it with your mom or whatever."

Max got a funny look on her face and Billy felt kinda scared. "Okay!" She smiled evilly like a true demon.

Billy didn't really know what-all she was plannin', nor did he particularly care to find out. He unlocked the door to his place and let the kids in. He'd told Max she could hang out for a bit, but he was kinda hoping that she wasn't intending to spend all night at his goddamn place again – he was supposed to see Harrington tonight. He went off to shower and get ready in case Steve wanted to screw around; Max and Sinclair laughed and yelled and flirted with each other in the kitchen.

By the time he'd finished grooming himself like a fairy, the kids were sitting around at the table in the kitchen all cozied up and yappin' together. They was sharing a big bag of chips that Maxine had procured outta somewhere so Billy sat down across from them and

pulled the bag over towards himself. Max sat up a little and rested her head in her hands, starin' at him.

“Okay, so?” she asked him all intense. Billy didn't get her for a moment; it was just Doritos.

“What?”

“Oh, my god!” Max rolled her eyes and made her fishface. “Did you read Tracey's stuff last night or what?”

Oh. Jesus God. Billy should have known she'd start up with him again. He felt all weird and shit right away – he still hadn't decided how he felt about everything. “Yeah, she ain't mad at me no more.”

“I *told* you!” Max yapped. She leaned forward on the little table and snatched the chip bag back from him, then commenced starin' like a freak. “*Well?*”

Billy knew that she wanted details or whatever but it was too much fun to piss her off. Anyway that shit was private. “What?” he said again.

She rolled her eyes at him again and grimaced; her goddamn face was gonna get stuck that way. “So what else did she say?”

“I dunno, just talked about school and shit. She moved in with her aunt.”

“Yeah, probably because she didn't have to worry about *you* anymore,” Maxine told him; Billy stared at her. He'd only met Tracey's aunt three or four times really, but she'd always been okay enough, he guessed. Mostly she talked in Italian, so Billy'd never had any fucking clue what she'd been sayin' about him. She'd lived out in the nice section of the suburbs, across town from where he and Max and Trace had all lived out over on the numbered streets. “I feel like a total asshole, I was just out there! I could have gone and seen her!”

Billy felt like a total asshole too; he'd been the one hollerin' on the phone at Max when she'd been out in Cali not to go and bug Tracey. Obviously he hadn't fucking known that Trace'd actually – well, whatever. That was his fault. He shoulda thought that she'd at least

wanna see Maxine again. “Yeah, sorry.”

“That’s okay!” Max said right away. “Maybe we could – okay, so did she say anything about me?”

Hehehe. She was really walkin’ right into it. “Uh, yeah, said you talk too much and your breath smells really bad, she never had the heart to tell ya to your face,” Billy told her; Max leaned over and slugged the shit out of him. “AHH! THE FUCK, MAN!”

“God, you’re such a *brat!*”

“Je-sus *fuck.*” He rubbed his arm. “Sorry, I ain’t got your necklace or whatever. My dad probably tossed it.”

Max shoved a handful of chips into her mouth and chewed all glum. “Figures.”

“Wait, so this is your old girlfriend, right?” Sinclair asked him; he had his hands folded up on the table like a wise old sage.

Billy gave him a suspicious look and Max did, too. “What do *you* know about it?” she asked before Billy could. He and Sinclair had been talkin’ about some shit lately, but he definitely hadn’t told Lucas nothing about Tracey. He wasn’t sure if he felt surprised or not: he’d pretty much figured that Maxine woulda already told Sinclair all about the shit that had gone down and how bad Billy’d fucked it up when they’d had to move out here.

“Okay, crazy-face, *why* do you have to come at me in five seconds?” Sinclair demanded; Max looked besotted with him. “You guys were talking about her last month, remember, at the roller-rink? And Dustin was like, *uh, is Tracey a man?*” He lowered his voice and did a pretty good imitation of Henderson’s dumb-ass lisp. Max laughed at it and Billy tried not to.

“Yeah, that’s my girl,” he told Sinclair. He felt stupid after he’d said it – obviously she wasn’t no more. It didn’t even matter.

“Okay, she wrote you guys or something?”

Billy scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah, way back last year.”

"Billy's dad was hiding our mail!" Max exclaimed to Sinclair.

Lucas made a face and rolled his eyes. "Gee, does not surprise me." He looked over at Billy. "So, what, are you gonna write her back?" he asked.

Billy didn't know what to say. He hadn't quite gotten that far yet, not really. "Don't really see the point," he muttered.

Maxine puffed her cheeks out at him obnoxiously. "Why not? You guys could still be *friends!*" she told him; Billy rolled his eyes too. "Please, it's not like she wants to get back with you again, she already has a new boyfriend too!"

Holy shit but he felt real cranky right away; he nearly threw all the chips and screamed *WHAT BOYFRIEND* before he realized that he was being a fucking crazy person. Goddamn, he needed to work on his shit.

He took a second. "Yeah, okay. What'm I gonna fucking write her, hey, sorry about all that shit, oh by the way, I'll send ya a picture of my fuckin' boyfriend if you show me yours?"

"I'm sure if you told her, she'd *want* a picture," Max told him all serious like some kinda philosopher, then she grinned. "She'd be like, *what, that?*" Billy stomped on her hard under the table; Max screamed her head off and grabbed at Lucas as if he could possibly protect her. "OWWW, YOU *DICK!*" She scuffed about under the table, trying to kick Billy back.

Sinclair wobbled away in his chair with Max clingin' to his shoulder. "Oh, my god, do you guys ever STOP? Are you freaking twelve years old?"

"He started it!" That was debatable; Billy stomped her again. "*AUGH!*" Max hollered like Charlie Brown. Finally she stopped kickin' at Billy and settled down again. "Are you really not going to say anything to her?"

Billy stuffed as many Doritos as possible into his mouth so's he wouldn't have to talk right away. "Yeah, I dunno."

"Why *not*?" she asked him; Billy gave her a look. "Don't you think you'd feel better if you got to talk to her? *I* already wrote her *three* pages, and I didn't say *anything* about Steve!"

Jesus God. "Look, don't fucking say shit about this to Harrington either, I mean it," Billy told her. He looked over at Lucas. "You too."

Sinclair held his hands up like a dramatic bitch. "Dude, I am so far removed from this conversation, I'm like out in the baseball field across the street. Don't flip out, I won't say anything to *Mr. Neurotic*."

"He ain't that bad," Billy said; Max and Sinclair exchanged a long look. "Fucking what?"

"*Billy*," Maxine said like he was dumb. "Come on!"

"What?"

"Okay, Steve's been cool and all since you guys started hooking up, but he was like a *major buzzkill* all last year," Lucas told him.

"Yeah, 'cause you brats were always gettin' into some shit."

"Okay, first of all – " Sinclair said all serious, leaning over the table; he pointed his finger in Billy's face – "you're totally right, we were." He made Billy laugh. "Whatever, don't worry, I'm not going to say anything to him. Not my business."

"Okay," Billy said. Max wasn't sayin' nothing so Billy glared over at her. "Max."

"*What*?" she yapped. "Oh my gosh, why do you think I can never keep my mouth shut?" she asked him. "Steve is a total drama queen, I don't want to deal with that!"

Billy rolled his eyes and didn't answer her. Harrington wasn't actually a drama queen or a buzzkill but he did get kinda stupid about shit sometimes; Billy did too so he didn't really have a leg to stand on. He didn't know if Steve would understand about –

"Um, but *okay*," Sinclair piped up again; Billy lamented his life. "Speaking from over here on the outfield, as someone who always

gets pulled into your *drama* anyway, don't you think you should, you know, tell your – “ Billy could see him trying not to make a face – “don't you think you should tell him if you're gonna get involved with your ex again?”

“They're not *involved*,” Maxine yapped all sharp like she was defending him or some shit. It made Billy feel pretty weird – she'd been his biggest fuckin' supporter over him and Harrington this whole year, but he hadn't really known how she was gonna act about Tracey wantin' to talk to him again. He knew she was cool with Steve and all, but Trace had been her girl too; they'd been real tight or whatever. He'd kinda always felt like he'd fucked it up for Max, too.

“All right, I'm just saying!” Sinclair said. He took a couple Doritos too and put them on his little napkin; he was all proper and shit. “You guys *just* had that huge fight,” he pointed out to Billy.

“Huh, I know that,” Billy told him even though he wasn't even sure which fight the kid meant. “S'not a big deal, I ain't gonna fuckin' fly out there or some shit.”

“Okay.” Sinclair folded his hands up again and just looked at Billy some more like a wise old sage. “Just ... think before you act. When you guys broke up in June, Steve slammed me into the frickin' wall over here!”

“Said I'm not gonna – ”

“That's because you were being an *asshole!*” Maxine told Sinclair; Lucas made a hideous face and curled his lip at her.

Billy ate some more chips. “Look, I'm gonna fuckin' tell him, cool your shit.”

“Okay,” Sinclair said again all doubtful.

“I thought you weren't in on this drama anyways, you're out at the park getting rained on, remember?” Maxine asked him.

“Okay, okay! Fine, talk about something else then, so what'd you do today when you were ignoring me until *four PM?*”

“Oh, whatever! I was at *work*, remember?” Max launched into some big story; Billy ate some more chips.

He was *gonna* tell Steve about it – he figured he should – but he just needed a couple days or whatever to calm the hell down and figure out exactly what he wanted to do. This crap had *just* happened; shit kept on happenin'. It was real tough, because Steve always got so – shit. Billy knew that he was a jealous fuck and all himself, but goddamn if Harrington wasn't about the most insecure guy that Billy'd ever met. You wouldn't think it, if you just talked to him for a minute, but he totally was: was like his own big secret or something.

Steve had even told him last month when they'd been fighting that he'd thought that Billy was gonna go out and fucking cheat on him in two seconds. Billy wasn't like that; he didn't think that he'd ever done anything that would make Steve think that shit about him. Not since they'd actually been together or whatever. He just really didn't want Steve to worry about it, him and Tracey.

It wasn't like there was anything to worry about anyway. He was fuckin' thinking too much. Billy was pretty sure Harrington knew by now that Billy was totally bent – he *had* to know, especially after the three-fingers thing the other night, and how *very* fucking vocally Billy'd been into all that; he squirmed in his fuckin' chair now just thinking about it – but if Steve found out that Billy was maybe thinking about writing his ex-girlfriend some big flowery note? It might be a big thing.

Billy didn't want it to be a big thing; he didn't want it to be any kinda thing, really. He still didn't even know what he wanted to do so he didn't need to bring it up to Harrington yet. Steve had said before, too, that he didn't need to even talk to Nancy no more if Billy didn't like it, and Billy guessed he kinda wanted to do the same thing. It was almost funny, because he'd always thought that nobody told him what to do, but Harrington was just about everything: if he got weird about it, or said some shit, then Billy'd just drop it. He'd do whatever Steve wanted him to.

The thing was, though, that even though he'd just told Sinclair that there was no point to it, Billy'd already been thinkin' all fucking day at work about what he might say to Trace, you know like if he ever

actually balled up and sat down and wrote her back. It was just that he'd never thought he'd even get to talk to her again – it felt like a fuckin' door or a window of opportunity had opened up, whatever corny shit people said. He felt all fucking stupid or giddy thinkin' about it, getting to talk to her again after so long, even if it was just a letter, too; he goddamn missed her.

He'd have to say sorry for how he'd been – he'd have to say sorry a *lot* – and make sure she was okay and that she was doin' all right. He'd have to tell her how he felt about everything: why he'd fucked everything up and all, and why shit had never been right with them, but he thought he could do that now. There was no way he could get outta telling her about Harrington but he thought he could do that too.

He almost kinda wanted to, really. Trace had been real important to him and Steve *was* real important to him so of course Billy fuckin' wanted to tell her about him. He might have to get fucking drunk and prolly misspell a buncha shit tellin' her, but he thought he could do it now. Afterwards she might hate him, but ... shit, she might not. He knew Tracey, too, at least he thought, and she might not.

She might not hate him and then he could at least talk to her a little and then he'd, like, have her back and all, kinda, in a way. Maybe in a better way, now. She could tell him about *her* senior year and her stupid fuckin' boyfriend and her aunt and whatever else she wanted. He could tell her all about Steve and about the creepy kids; Billy already knew she'd get a fuckin' kick outta Henderson. He could tell her about Max and about Will too, all the shit with his old man, and about Mike's house versus Mike's the pizza place and *shit* Billy already knew he was bein' real fucking stupid about it.

Anyway he'd have to see how Steve felt about it first – he might not like it or he might not get it. It didn't feel fair again, him wantin' Harrington to be cool with him talking to Tracey when Billy'd been such a fucking prick to Steve about him hangin' out with Nancy.

He just really didn't feel like fucking bringing up yet so he didn't need to be thinkin' about all this shit. He still didn't even know what-all he wanted to do – right now he felt like he could tell Trace about himself, but tomorrow he might not be so brave.

Maxine was still yappin' on as Billy'd been sitting there totally zoned out; he tried to clear his head and catch the end of her story. Justin Gilmore had come into the general store with his mom – Billy almost remembered who that was – and Max had overcharged them triple for a big box of toilet paper. “I just said the ad in the paper was from last week,” she went on and on.

“Holy shit, I can't believe he came in with his *mom*,” Sinclair said in delight.

“I know! You should have seen what he was *wearing*! He can't say anything to Will!”

“Man, you're gonna get in trouble doin' that shit,” Billy told her.

“Please, Phil overcharges people that he doesn't like *all* the time, he and Joyce already showed me the override codes on the register!” Max said all proud; Billy was pretty sure Phil was her boss.

Over in the living room, the doorknob rattled and then Harrington was walking in. He had a big grin on his face; Billy and Max and Sinclair all went silent like they gotten caught talkin' shit. “Bill, did you get your car back?” Steve asked him all excited. He looked around and took note of Max and Lucas. “Oh, cool, there's a buncha kids here, big surprise.”

“Hi Steve,” Lucas and Max said like syrup; Billy slumped down in his chair and tried not to make a face at them.

Harrington walked over to the kitchenette and put down his little backpack and all his crap. “What's in your bags?” Maxine asked immediately. She was like a fucking bloodhound when there was food or free shit around.

“Uh, what? Nothing, don't worry about it,” Steve told her. He sat down at the table too and scraped Billy's chair over closer and kissed him. “Hi, hello, are you talkin' to me today?” he said like a nerd.

Billy kissed him back; he forgot all the shit he'd been thinkin' about in two seconds. “Yeah, hi.”

Steve touched the side of Billy's face where he'd gotten all banged up

the other day. “Hey, that looks better,” he said, sounded like a goddamn mom.

“Thanks, feels okay.”

“Aren't they cute?” Maxine said to Lucas like a little shitheel.

“Adorable,” Sinclair said dryly; Billy snarled and Steve ignored them.

“When'd you get your car back?” he asked Billy. “What'd you do, go into the city without me last night?”

Sinclair was givin' Billy a big look that said that *Mr. Neurotic* was here; Billy ignored it. “Just got it today, we was workin' on it all yesterday.”

“Hey, that's awesome, man. What's it been, like a whole month?” Steve said all supportive; Jesus Christ Billy wanted to cry or fuckin' throw him on the table or some shit.

“Like three weeks, yeah.”

“He just picked us up from the arcade, we're not staying long,” Maxine informed Harrington.

“How'd it feel to drive her again?”

“Yeah, was good,” Billy said. He thought about it – he hadn't really felt weird or freaked out driving his car around no more, not like last month. It not lookin' like total crap anymore had helped, so had the kids being all pumped about it for him. “Can still let me take your ride around, though.” Steve smiled at him.

He guessed that he felt kinda shitty or guilty right now, having been talkin' about Steve with Max and Sinclair, and then thinkin' about Steve and Tracey, when Steve'd just been driving over here to come see him, and he didn't know *shit*. Billy didn't know how to bring it up or whatever. He'd never really thought about someone so much before; maybe it really shouldn't even matter or maybe he just needed to chill the fuck out.

Harrington stole the bag of chips and started tearin' into them like a

goddamn savage. "So what've you guys been talking about?"

"Nothin'," Billy said like a guilty fuck.

"Max saw Justin Gilmore today," Sinclair told Steve.

"Oh, what, really? That's the kid who Will decked last year, right?"
Oh right.

"He was shopping with his *mother*," Max exclaimed again; Billy figured that kinda shit was supposed to be embarrassing or somethin'. He'd been a kid when his mom had died so he guessed he wouldn't know.

Steve laughed at her and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah? What'd you do to him?" he asked; he had his Max-is-amusing face on.

Max reiterated her story about work – "Okay, you're going to get in trouble doin' that kinda stuff," Harrington warned her; Maxine rolled her eyes around the whole room.

"God, Billy *just* said that!" she yapped. She stole the Doritos bag back from Steve. "What about you, what'd you do this week since you didn't have us to hang out with?"

Harrington looked even more amused by her; he let her take the chips. "Okay, well, speaking of losers who hang out with their mom," he said exaggeratedly. He spent about five minutes goin' on with a story of his own – he was all ticked off because he'd seen Tommy Hall last night when he'd been driving his moms around; apparently Tommy'd flipped them off and hollered at them or some shit. Steve said he couldn't even do anything on account of his mom bein' in the car: "Also, I was in a no-park zone," he said like a little geek. He watched Billy's face in delight as Billy struggled with all his might not to make a comment. "Really, nothing?"

"I don't want ya to get a ticket," Billy said innocently.

"Huh, you sound like my mom." Jesus God.

"Man, screw Tommy Hall," Sinclair said with a sneer on his face. "He says some racist shit to me like every other week, he was lurking

around at the comic shop on Sunday morning when Dustin and I were getting the new *Doom Patrol*.”

“*What?* You didn't tell me about that!” Maxine gasped; almost instantly she got up to about a level five in her hysteria.

“Yeah, well, you kind of had other stuff going on,” Lucas told her dryly.

“What was he saying to you?”

Sinclair looked kinda uncomfortable right away – that made Billy feel weird, too. “It, uh ... doesn't matter,” he said dismissively. He turned back towards Steve. “I guess he knows I hang out with you guys, he finally managed to pick me out from the other two black kids in town.”

“That's not *funny*, Lucas,” Max said all aghast.

Harrington got major frown-wrinkle between his eyebrows; he looked over at Billy. “He say any shit to you lately?”

“Nah, he ain't bothered me.” At least Billy didn't *think* he had – his bullshit-filter had been pretty good lately and all. He hadn't even been thinkin' about his old man showing up or anything until he'd busted right into his goddamn apartment. Tommy Hall hadn't been around Billy's work since back in the winter when Billy'd tossed him out; last time he'd seen the kid had been the big ruckus when he and Harrington had thrown down with him at the end of February.

“What did he say to you?” Max asked Sinclair again, demanded really. He just shrugged, so she glanced back over at Steve and Billy. “You guys should just beat him up again, why's he going after *Lucas?*”

“Gee, why do *you* think?” Sinclair asked her; Maxine frowned hugely.

“He's like you guys' age, what's his *problem?*”

“Deck him for ya if I could,” Billy offered.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Please, you wouldn't notice Tommy Hall unless

he fuckin' had a noose around my neck or a picture of Kevin Costner taped to his back," he told Billy.

Haha. Sinclair knew him so well. Also, Jesus God, Maxine needed to shut her fuckin' mouth about Kevin fuckin' Costner; she thought she was too hilarious. Billy'd said *one thing*, one time. "Watch it," he told Sinclair right as Max gasped, "That's not *funny!*" again, probably not about the same shit.

Harrington stretched and leaned out across the table – he was still wearing his tie from work and he looked all cute and shit. "Hey, I didn't know he was botherin' you like that, that's seriously not cool. You should have told us," he said, referring to himself and Billy like they was Sinclair's gay dads or something. "He shouldn't get away with that shit."

"Yeah, it doesn't matter," Sinclair said again in his weird voice. "I know that kind of – I can, like, tell about people, just forget about it."

"Okay, I don't really know what that means – "

"He'd never actually try some big thing with me, okay? I think the biggest threat that I've ever had to deal with was, like, Max's *dad*," Sinclair told Harrington. "I guess we don't really have to worry about him anymore," he added. He looked over at Billy. "Nice job, by the way."

"Yeah, thanks," Billy said. The frown-wrinkle between Steve's eyebrows got even more defined; he was gonna pop a blood vessel or some shit at any moment. Billy poked him in the forehead so Steve smacked Billy's hand anyway.

"Excuse you!" he said to Billy. "Okay, but don't you guys think – "

"Oh, my god, I'm literally *begging* you to drop it," Sinclair said. "Isn't it time for you to eat your first meal or whatever weird shit you and Dustin do?"

It was almost seven already; Harrington made a face but let them change the topic. Lucas sat up straighter and looked over at Max. "Still want to go out to dinner?"

"Sure, am I still paying for you?" Maxine said real sweet.

"Ha, ha."

"You guys need a lift?" Billy asked them. Normally he wouldn't really give a shit if they needed a ride or not, especially with Harrington here, but couldn't help himself – he was too jazzed up from havin' the Camaro back.

Sinclair rolled his eyes and then smiled. "Thanks, but we can walk."

"Your loss."

"Is it?" Sinclair asked him like a little smart-ass; he grinned at Billy's face. "Bye, have fun on your date or whatever, *I'm in the outfield*," he told Billy with meaning.

"Uh, where?" Harrington said like a dodo. Everybody ignored him.

Max jumped up and got her purse from off the counter. "Mom says come over again tomorrow," she informed Billy.

"Okay, yeah." He guessed he could do that.

The kids took off and Billy was finally left alone with Harrington. Steve still looked all unhappy over Sinclair's plight; he wasn't even eatin' the Doritos anymore.

Billy wondered if they were gonna talk about Tommy fuckin' Hall all night. He didn't really feel like *talking* any more. "Hey, fix your face, man," he told Harrington.

"My face is fine, thank you," Steve said, still grouchy. "I didn't, uh, I didn't know that he was going through all that with Tommy, that shit shouldn't happen."

Billy got up and went over to the door to make sure that it was locked. Steve was watchin' him when he turned around and Billy felt pretty weird again: he didn't really know what-all to say about the shit with Sinclair. He knew that maybe he didn't have too many great view-points himself or whatever; he couldn't say *shit*. It was fucked up though. He liked to think that he'd never gone out of his way to

pick on somebody over somethin' they couldn't help, just for *fun* or for whatever reason people did that kinda crap, but probably he had anyway. He knew that he'd picked on Sinclair, but that hadn't exactly been fun.

“Don't worry, he's tough. He can handle it,” he told Steve. If Sinclair could handle *Billy* he could handle about anybody. Steve didn't say anything so Billy added, “Can't protect everybody.”

“Okay, I'm – not doing that, Lucas doesn't even like me,” Harrington said; like usual Billy had no clue what the fuck he was talkin' about. He *did* kinda wanna know why Harrington had apparently slammed Sinclair into a wall two months ago; that didn't sound like Steve. Steve said, “I just didn't really think anybody actually bothered him about that stuff. I guess I never really thought people were like that, before, uh, before – “

Before you showed up here; Billy could hear the words he wasn't sayin'. Steve watched him as he walked back over to the kitchen. “I, I mean, yeah, I guess it doesn't matter if, uh, he says it's fine.”

“We can go beat Tommy right now, I ain't got plans,” Billy told him. He leaned against the table with his arms stretched out.

Steve was still staring at him; he raised one eyebrow up. “Don't you?”
Fucking flirt.

“What you wanna do, you wanna get into it with 'im?”

Harrington made a face. “*Please*, I just worked for nine hours, ask me again on Friday.” he said like a forty-year-old lawyer; Billy tried not to grin at him. Steve touched his forearm for a couple seconds. “Hey, can you sit back down, I didn't see you for like three days.”

“Okay.” Billy sat down like an obedient bitch. He leaned in to get kissed; Steve got one of his dopey smiles on his face but then he backed up and put a hand on Billy's shoulder, pushing him away a little.

“Wait, wait, hang on.”

Billy felt real weird right away – maybe Harrington had figured out

that he and Lucas and Max had all been talkin' about him five minutes before he'd walked in or somethin'. "What?"

"Okay, Dustin called me at work earlier, he told me that he fuckin' threw up on you this morning. You feel okay?"

Oh. That was all sweet and shit. Then Steve said, "Because I *really* don't wanna catch anything off you guys, I cannot get sick and miss a buncha time off work right before we go on vacation," which was way less sweet.

Jesus God. "You already fuckin' kissed me when you walked in here, man," Billy pointed out.

"I – oh, right." Harrington's face fell; he looked like a cartoon or some shit. "Oh, yeah, I guess I did."

"You fuckin' bimbo."

Steve laughed. "Okay, I'm sorry. Do you feel okay?" he asked again.

"He ain't even sick, don't worry. Prolly just got stressed out from the earthquake or whatever, you know how he does," Billy told him and then felt like a gay dad again or some shit.

Steve's face fell even more. "Uh, what?" he said.

"What?"

"Nothing, I – yeah, he didn't tell me about that part," Steve said in a funny voice. "When, when was that, this morning too?"

"Yeah, only lasted about twenty seconds," Billy said. He waited for Harrington to make a crack about Billy's sexual prowess; he just frowned some more though. "Okay, come on. He probably just didn't wanna make ya worry."

Harrington grimaced like Billy was bein' funny, then laughed a little. "Uh, yeah, no, Dustin's favorite thing is making me worry, that doesn't really make any sense. I dunno why he wouldn't tell me we had another one – you know we've been logging 'em and stuff," he told Billy all earnestly. The frown-wrinkle was starting to come back

in full force again; Billy tried not to despair.

“Steve, can you not do this?” Billy asked him. “Just chill out, shit was like twelve hours ago. Everything's fine.”

“What, I know it's fine,” Steve mumbled; he frowned for a couple more seconds and shook his head, brushing his pretty hair away from his shirt collar. “Okay, whatever, you're right. I don't wanna – okay, I'm not gonna get all freaky, sorry. I'm good. Yep.” He wrapped a hand around one of the legs of Billy's chair and pulled Billy closer to himself, leaning in to kiss him again.

Billy pushed his face back – Steve's nose smushed against his palm for a second. “Get away, I don't want it anymore.” Well he did want it of course but he had his fuckin' pride. Germs from *Henderson*, Jesus fuck.

“Mmmph-mmmph,” Steve said dramatically against his palm. Billy took his hand away. “Oh my god, are you serious, Bill?” Harrington asked him all hurt; he made his eyes get real big like a puppy's. “I was *joking* about the stomach thing, come on.”

“Bullshit, now you gotta work for it.”

Steve rolled his eyes and then smiled. “Okay, if that's what you want. I can do that.”

Billy thought about it; he looked over at the counter. “Hey, what's in your bags?”

“What?” Steve said blankly. “Oh, yeah! I didn't wanna say anything when Max was here, I got you cake from my work!” he said like a little geek; goddamn Billy really loved him. “It was Linda's birthday, we did a big thing.”

“Oh, nice. I forgot about that shit.”

“Yeah, she was turning fifty-five again. We took lunch for like three hours, had to stay late.”

“You get her something?”

"Of course I did, I'm like the office suck-up," Steve told him. "I went to the mall with Dustin on Monday, I bought her some book that my mom told me about."

Billy had to try really hard not to ask what the book was. Harrington probably already thought Billy was some kinda fucking nerd and all, bringin' his books on the camping trip. "Okay, tell me 'bout this cake," he said instead; that was more important.

"Oh, uhh. It was pretty fancy, I got you a piece with chocolate icing and another with, uh, the white kind, I didn't wanna have to make the choice."

God he was so fucking dorky. It meant that Billy had two pieces of cake, though. "White's just vanilla," he pointed out.

"No, it's not, don't be racist," Steve told him severely; Billy raised his eyebrows and managed not to make a comment. "What? I'm serious, it's a different thing, the girls got into this big discussion about frosting for like a half hour, I learned a lot. We work really hard, as you can tell."

He was making Billy laugh too much. "Okay, man."

"Yeah, so that was my day, what about you? You didn't call me or anything, I kinda thought you would," Harrington said lightly; it made Billy feel like total fucking shit again even though Steve just kept talkin'. "What happened with you and Susan on Monday, I'm guessing it's fine since Max was here and all."

"Uh, yeah, was okay," Billy managed. "Gimme my food, I'll tell ya about it."

"What, really? Okay." Harrington went over to the counter and fussed around with his bags. "Wow, are you actually gonna tell me stuff without actin' like you're, ah, getting teeth pulled at the dentist? Maybe you are getting sick," he said, teasing Billy.

"Ha, ha." He was too funny.

Steve looked over and grinned at him, then wandered over to the fridge and started riflin' through it. "Ooh, when'd you get *take-out*?"

he asked; he'd found all the food Susan had left with him the other night.

"Max'n her mom got me a bunch of shit. You can have the rest if you want, should still be good," Billy told him.

"Really?" Harrington looked all affected like Billy'd just given him a goddamn ring or some shit. Food was really important to Steve. "You don't want it?"

"Nah, I ain't hungry."

"Okay! Thanks!" He closed the fridge and went over to the microwave all happy.

Billy got up again and flopped out on the couch, then turned the TV on while Steve wreaked havoc in the kitchen, spillin' stuff and getting his food all set up. "You want a drink or anything?" he asked Billy.

"Yeah, I got shit in the freezer."

"Oh, do you want – ? Okay, I meant like a soda, but sure." Steve found the bottle of booze. "Uh, you want a chaser or somethin'?"

"I'm good."

"All right, Mr. Hardcore." Steve wandered over to the couch holdin' their plates and his drink and Billy's whiskey. He handed over the cake and the bottle and then sat down too. "Hoo boy, this is gonna give me heartburn," he said like a geek; somehow he already had food in his mouth. "Okay, I got my stuff, I thought you were gonna tell me about your m – uh, stepmom's."

"Oh right." It'd been two days since he'd been over so Billy didn't even know what he wanted to say now. He drank some booze and told Steve all, well most of, the shit: about how Sue had wanted to see him and all the crap they'd talked about with his dad – he tried not to make it sound too sappy or whatever. "Guess she knows about us too." He told Steve about Susan saying she wasn't like Billy's dad, and how she'd told Billy that his business was his business.

"Okay, but I seem like such a *what*, why'd you stop her?" Harrington

demanded; he was being too stupid again. “I wanna know what she was gonna say. A *nice guy* or some crap, I get that a lot.”

“Bet you do, suck-up,” Billy teased him.

Steve ignored him. “What, such an *attentive boyfriend*? A, ah, *arduous lover*?” He leered at Billy.

Jesus God. “Gross, man, shut the hell up!” Billy said in disgust; Steve laughed. “Yeah, you wanna think about my stepmom sayin' that shit about you?”

Steve laughed some more and made a face. “Okay, okay, I guess not. Hey, so that's good, right? I mean you guys are all cool and all?”

“Yeah, guess so.”

“Okay, so what'd you do last night?”

Billy felt kinda guilty again; he drank some more whiskey. “El came over here, the chief brought her 'round. She and Max burned a buncha shit in the kitchen.”

“Yeah, I saw that pan in the sink, I was trying not to say something,” Steve told him. “So did Hop say anything about your dad? Uh, you don't have to talk about it.”

“Just said he shouldn't bother me anymore, he's stayin' at some motel like an hour away.”

“Okay.” Steve watched Billy drink his booze; he had a weird look on his face. “Jesus, I can't believe she really kicked him out again. You think it'll last?”

Really Billy didn't know – Sue did seem like she was totally done with his old man this time, but shit never worked out the way you wanted it to. It never had for his real mom. “Yeah, I don't know, man.” He put his bottle down on the ground and stretched his feet out; he took a moment to mourn the coffee table again. “Shit's gonna suck. Even if she puts him away, he's prolly still gonna try and take the house from her.”

“Can he really do all that?”

“Uh, I dunno,” Billy said again. “Can't do nothin' about it.”

“I guess so.” Steve frowned some more, then turned the TV up so they could stop talking about it. They watched a rerun of *Crime Story* and Steve made a mess of his food bein' a little asshole and mouthing off with his theories about what was gonna happen; he got the ending right even though it was a double-twist like they liked to do sometimes.

“Come on, you watched this shit before!” Billy accused him. Harrington laughed and kissed him; he leaned over so Billy put his hand in Steve's hair.

“No, I didn't, quit bullying me. I missed all the stuff that came on in the spring, I was busy hooking up with you.” Billy felt proud – *Crime Story* was primetime TV after all. He kissed Steve back and almost knocked their plates over.

That got them started with that; Billy let Harrington push him up against the back of the couch. He hadn't really drank too much but he still felt a little spinny or dizzy almost. He wasn't sure if it was from the booze, or from gettin' to really touch Steve after like four days or whatever it'd been. It felt like everything was moving super-fast somehow; Billy didn't mind. Steve stamped his knee down on the remote and made the TV go all loud by accident and they spent a couple seconds trying to turn it down. “Whoops, okay.”

Steve tossed the remote onto the floor and climbed on top of him again; Billy sat up a little so Steve pushed him back down. He got Billy's t-shirt off and started kissing his throat and the side of his jaw. “I missed you, man,” he mumbled into Billy's ear. His breath tickled down Billy's neck; it almost made him shake.

Shit. “Yeah, me too.” He cupped a hand around the back of Steve's neck and guided their mouths together again. They made out for a while but he couldn't seem to get comfortable – everything felt too sharp somehow, even with the booze. He kept squirming around on the couch, was like he couldn't get turned on like normal or something. The leather fabric of the sofa was clinging to his back and

it was buggin' him more than it usually would – it was too stupid. The feeling mounted and mounted until it felt like it was gonna bubble over; Billy didn't know what it was gonna turn into. He kept looking over at the closed front door even though he didn't mean to.

It didn't feel safe or something anymore, as if his old man was about to burst in again even though Billy knew that wasn't really possible. There was this creeping feeling curlin' way up in his chest, like when you was sneakin' around with somebody and you was scared of getting caught, except it wasn't exciting this time or whatever.

He bit Steve's lip too hard for like the fourth time and finally managed to sit up a little; he curled his fingers around Steve's arm for a minute. “Yeah, don't, don't – uh, dunno if I, I can do this shit out here right now.”

“Why, what's wrong? Do you want – ?” Steve frowned and then followed Billy's gaze over to the door. “Oh, because of your ... “ He trailed off. “Bill, nobody's gonna come in here again, it's fine.” He sat back a little and let Billy get up. “Uh, I just – yeah, we don't gotta do anything – “

“Sorry.”

“No, that's, that's okay,” Steve told him. His work shirt was all wrinkled up; somehow Billy'd almost strangled him with his tie too. “We can just, uh, go to your room, or, it doesn't matter, we don't gotta do anything,” he said again.

Okay well. Billy still wanted to do something. “We can go to my room,” he said; Steve smiled at him. “You eat enough or whatever?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so. Come on, we've got like an hour before I start burpin' all over you, I can still make it good,” Harrington told him. Jesus he was too romantic.

They went into Billy's room and Steve threw him down on the bed right away, then fell on top of him in the dark, tryin' to make his way over. “Ow, shit, okay, I didn't really think that through,” Steve said; he elbowed Billy on accident, then swept an arm over the end table to turn on the lava lamp. He squinted for a moment in the weak light,

sitting up to look at Billy. "Hey, are ... are you okay?" he asked in a kinda funny voice.

"Yeah, I'm good. Dunno why I was freakin' out, sorry." He felt a little silly now that they'd gotten up and all; he wanted Steve to climb back on top of him.

"No, yeah, that's fine, it doesn't matter," Steve said right away. "No, but I – meant, uh, are you okay with this week and all, are you doin' okay with everything? I ... we can talk about it some more if you want, whatever you want."

Billy wondered why Harrington had gotten Billy shirtless and sprawled out in his room and then decided to talk about fucking *feelings* or whatever. He almost felt annoyed – all week everybody'd been treatin' him weird and asking him shit like if he was okay; he didn't want Steve to be like that. He was fucking tired of telling people that he was all right or that he wasn't all right. He said that now: "Everybody's been askin' me if I'm okay all week, I'm tired of it, man."

"Yeah, because people care about you, Bill," Steve said; Billy didn't answer him right away. "I just wanted to say, you know, if you need something – "

Jesus God. "Look, I'm fine. If I wasn't fine, I'd be fuckin' crying on you again, right?"

Harrington made a really great face. "Uh, yeah, I don't know about all th – "

"What I really need is for you to stop askin' me that shit," Billy told him. He hoped he didn't sound too mean or whatever; he wasn't trying to be. "I'm serious. I'm good, it's done or whatever. I'm gonna start screamin' or some shit if anybody else asks me if I'm all right."

Steve nodded all serious. "Okay. Okay, I'll stop. What?" he said when Billy made a face. "I'm serious too, I won't ask you again, promise. I just, uh ... " He paused for a second. "Yeah, that means that you have to, to actually tell me if you're not okay and all, can you do that?"

Somehow Billy managed not to roll his eyes. Jesus, this shit was too emotional for him, and they still hadn't even had sex yet or whatever. "Yeah, I will. What?" he said too, since Steve was givin' him some kinda big look. "I mean it, all right?"

"Okay," Steve said again. He leaned in and stared at Billy some more like a weird person, chewing on his bottom lip. "So, we're good?"

"You're the one who keeps askin' me shit," Billy pointed out.

Steve rolled his eyes; he was smiling now though. "All right, okay. So, uh – can we hook up now?" he asked intensely.

"Yeah." He grabbed Steve and pulled him on top of himself again. Harrington's tie kept hittin' him in the face which was kinda fun. Billy wrapped it around his hand twice and dragged Steve closer. "Why you still got this shit on, man?"

"What, I thought you liked that." Billy wisely did not confirm nor deny; Steve laughed at him. They rolled around on the bed some more and Billy got Steve's tie offa him finally. He started unbuttoning Harrington's fancy work shirt; he found one of his Def Leppard t-shirts underneath it.

"Steve. You gotta stop taking all my fuckin' clothes."

"What? I'm not," Steve lied. "What am I supposed to do, I don't have stuff here." That was a lie too.

"I don't got shit to wear."

"Hmm, yeah, I guess that's a pretty big problem for you," Harrington told him real sweet; he started unbuttoning Billy's jeans. "I guess you'll just have to stay here like this and wait for me to come over."

Jesus Christ. Billy reached for him; Steve pushed him down again. He pulled Billy's jeans and his boxers off and then climbed back on top of him, kissing him hard and working a hand between them.

The room felt too hot which didn't make sense since he didn't have any clothes on; Steve was still fully dressed which didn't seem fair. Billy definitely wasn't shy or nothin' but he felt a little dumb – he

wanted to fucking feel him or whatever. Steve's stupid fancy belt kept pressing against the tip of his dick when they'd move a certain way and that wasn't exactly what Billy wanted to feel pressin' against his dick. He felt all desperate and shit; he wanted – god, he didn't know what he wanted. He pulled at the belt to try and undo it and Steve threw him down again.

“Quit grabbing me, I'm busy,” Harrington told him like a bossy bitch. He pushed Billy's arms up over his head to hold him back; truly Billy felt delighted.

“Gettin' kinda aggressive here, man.”

“Sorry. I'll stop.” Steve let Billy's arms go but then smacked his hands away when Billy tried to grab him again. “Come on, I didn't see you for like three days, I've got shit I wanna do.”

Hahaha. “What do you wanna do?” Billy asked him; Steve didn't answer and started kissing him some more. Fuck he was too hot – Billy couldn't take it. “Lemme touch you.” He tried to undo the belt again so Steve threw him down for a third time and stretched out above him.

“Yeah, in a minute.” Jesus Christ.

Steve got both of Billy's arms pinned up over Billy's head on the pillow again and held one of his big hands over Billy's wrists. He trailed his other hand down Billy's chest and his stomach and wrapped it around his cock. Shit Billy wanted him so bad; it almost hurt.

“Fuck,” he grunted. Harrington was such a goddamn tease. Billy struggled against him and Steve laughed. “God, come on, man.”

“What, you don't like it?” Steve asked him. “You always do this shit to me.”

Billy felt too dizzy again, not in a bad way this time. He wondered if he'd actually gotten a little drunk or something; he hadn't drank too much. “No I don't,” he said. “Let me up.”

“Hmm.” Steve still had his hand around Billy's wrists, holding him

down; he flexed his fingers and squeezed a little. That kinda hurt too – Billy was into it. “Nah, I don't think so.”

Shit. “Lemme touch you,” Billy begged him again. That was like half the fun, more than half really.

“Uh, yeah, in a minute,” Steve muttered like he was distracted. He leaned down and kissed Billy some more; Billy moaned into his mouth like a little bitch. Steve was still holding Billy's arms up over his head and he still had a hand around Billy's cock. He wasn't going hard enough and Billy was gonna fucking come on him in another four seconds anyway.

He was pretty sure he was makin' some kinda stupid sound into Steve's mouth – in another minute he was gonna start fucking drooling. He bucked up against Steve and almost managed to throw him off. They struggled with each other for a few seconds: it was starting to get less sexy-like and more like they was actually fighting again; either way Billy still liked it. “Lemme up, I'll suck you off.”

“What?” Harrington looked at him like he'd said something totally weird; he threw Billy down on the pillow again. “You – no, I'm, I'm tryin' to do something here, you don't have to get me off first all the time.”

That wasn't exactly what Billy was trying to do; he wasn't actually that nice. Just wanted him or whatever. “Yeah, I know that.”

Billy had needs and shit too. One of his needs was havin' Steve's dick in his mouth pretty much as frequently as possible. He tried to press up against Harrington again and Steve just pushed him down like it wasn't even tough for him. Jesus Christ.

“God, can you just stop trying to – just let me do you, I wanna make you feel good,” Steve told him. He was staring at Billy all intense and his big eyes were so pretty and so dark and it was almost too much or somethin'; Billy didn't know what it was.

He didn't know what to say. Nobody'd ever said that kinda shit to him before and it made him feel kinda stupid really. He was too sweaty and Steve was too hot and Billy couldn't catch his breath and

his *fucking* dick hurt; he was too hard and Steve still had too many clothes on. "I just – "

"Stop talking," Steve commanded him and kissed him again. He let Billy's wrists go and jerked him off for a couple seconds, then let his hand drift lower, squeezing Billy's balls too-hard like he knew Billy liked. "Is that okay?"

"Fuck. I, ah – " He squirmed on the bed, wrapping a hand around Steve's forearm to slow him down; he felt like he was gonna bust in two seconds. "I – "

"Tell me what you want."

"I just – can you – " He pushed Steve's hand even lower; he couldn't say it. Jesus Christ he'd never thought he could want something like *that* but he did – he wanted it so fucking bad, it felt like this fire goin' throughout his whole body. That made him feel stupid too. "I need – "

Steve's fingers pressed against him; he exhaled hard. "Yeah, I can – " He twisted his hand, freeing himself from Billy's grip. "I can – whatever you want, I'll do whatever you want."

He kissed Billy again and fumbled around in the bed-side drawer for the lube – he about knocked everything off the whole fuckin' nightstand, sending the lava-lamp crashing to the floor and enveloping them in darkness for a moment before dim light flickered out across the floor. "Oh, *shit*," he muttered like a little geek. "Oh, god, what'd I break?" Billy started laughing too much and Steve grabbed at him again. "NO, nonono, don't move!"

"I'm not – "

"Okay. Okay, we're good, I've got this." Steve got everything set back up on the end-table and got himself situated with his lube. He wriggled back up on the bed and stretched out over Billy again and they kissed some more.

Steve kept smiling against his mouth like a total nerd. He got Billy's cock all slicked up and then started touching him real slow. He

shifted on the bed and used his knee to push Billy's thighs apart even further; Billy almost couldn't breathe. He couldn't imagine what he fucking looked like, all spread out like some slut or whatever. "God, you are like so beautiful, you don't even know," Steve muttered, startin' up with his romantic shit.

Jesus god. Billy lamented his life, sounded like they was in frickin' *Pride and Prejudice* or some shit. Then again maybe not because there was no way that Billy'd ever read something that goddamn long. Steve made him feel so fuckin' flustered or stupid or something. He still wasn't giving Billy what he wanted; he was still just touching him too-slow, circling two fingers around his asshole. Fuck. Steve was about to put his *fingers* inside Billy's *asshole*, wasn't really any pretty way to say it or think it. It still felt good though so it didn't matter. He guessed that was what sex was about anyway. "Christ, can you just fuckin' do it?" Billy begged him.

"What, I am." Steve pushed inside him with one finger and Billy breathed out harshly; sometimes he still couldn't believe they were doin' this shit now. He angled his hips and pushed *down* so that Steve could get in him more and they both moaned like idiots. "Is that okay? It doesn't hurt, right?"

"I ain't a fuckin' doll, keep going," Billy told him. Steve pressed another finger inside him and Billy was pretty sure he moaned again; he was too turned on to feel stupid or embarrassed though. He couldn't really think too much to describe how it felt but it kinda *burned* or something now, not as bad as it had the first time or two. Even so it never exactly hurt or nothin'. It felt really good; it was what he wanted. "Fuck, Steve, come on," he babbled out like a moron.

"God, okay," Steve muttered. He shifted around again and got some kinda rhythm going. "God, you're so good." He kept breathing out all heavy and started up saying his romantic shit again and saying Billy's name over and over as he fucked Billy with his fingers. Billy'd laugh at him if he wasn't so fucking turned on; he guessed he liked that too.

Harrington got really into this shit: he got real worked up every time they'd do this, as if he was actually fucking Billy or screwing him, instead of just touching him or fingering him or whatever and not

gettin' anything done to himself. Christ, Steve was actually fingering him – it was almost too weird to think about. Billy wasn't a goddamn girl or anything, but *fuck* he really wanted it.

“Fuck,” he said again. He wrapped his arms around Steve and fisted his hands in Steve's stupid t-shirt (*Billy's stupid t-shirt, goddamn it*), yanking it out from where it was tucked into his preppy slacks from work. “Jesus Christ – you're such – a fucking – nerd,” he gritted out, pulling Steve's t-shirt as far up his back as he could.

Steve laughed and kept on goin' at him. He started moving his hand faster so at least Billy'd got him to do that. “God, that's really sweet, you're too nice to me. You want me to stop?”

“*Fuck*,” Billy managed. “God.”

“Yeah, I know.” Steve pulled his fingers out almost all the way and then thrust them back in; Billy squirmed and made another fucking embarrassing sound.

They went at it for a while – well, Harrington went at *him* really. Billy didn't know how long it took, a couple minutes, maybe, record time for him. Whenever Steve would move his fingers inside Billy a certain way, it felt as if his whole body was seizing up or jerking or something; he couldn't get control of himself. He couldn't tell if it hurt or felt weird or felt good or what but it made him want to fucking come, *really hard*. His cock kept twitching against his stomach and he was trying not to moan all loud and shit.

After a couple times of that happening Steve seemed to get it and then he started doing it even more; Billy had to try even harder not to go totally nuts. It was too good – it was almost too much or something. He just clung to Steve's back and the back of his neck and let Steve go at him.

It'd been like four or five nights since they'd actually hooked up so Billy knew he wasn't gonna last very long anyway. He was surprised he hadn't come right away; sometimes he did that and then Harrington made fun of him. Even though he'd had other shit on his mind, he'd been thinkin' about Steve, too – not *just* the sex stuff and all that shit, but okay he'd been thinking about the sex stuff too. He'd

been waitin' to see Steve and to get with him again; he always was.

The thing was that Billy'd always felt like there was something wrong with him before. He'd never really wanted to hook up with someone like crazy all the time, not before he'd met Harrington, at least. He knew that was pretty weird. He *could* do it all the time, of course, most times anyway – he was a fuckin' teenager after all or whatever – but he'd never really needed to. He'd finally figured that maybe he was just too weird or somethin', like his body that he liked to show off so fuckin' much was just built wrong. Maybe he just didn't need sex all the time or he didn't need to fucking come all the time. Maybe not everybody needed to do that shit. Apparently *that* had been all wrong and he'd been savin' it all for Harrington or whatever; it was too fucking corny to ever say it.

Steve was still goin' at him, kinda rough now which was how Billy wanted it. They were pressed together at this weird angle, with Steve propped up on his elbow above Billy, and they kept kissing real sloppy and then breaking apart so's they could breathe. Steve would grab at Billy's hips and drag him further down on the bed and he had two fingers inside of him and Billy had his legs splayed out like a fucking chick or somethin'; Steve *really* didn't make him feel like a girl.

God Steve was so fucking awful: he kept fingering Billy and then moving away, pulling out and then dragging his fingers around Billy's hole, which made Billy *really* go nuts, and then pressing back in; Steve was the worst person. Every now and then he'd pull away and use his other hand to jerk at Billy's cock for a couple seconds; two times he stopped to get more lube and it was kinda awkward for a minute but then it was good again. Billy knew he shouldn't feel awkward if Steve wanted to do it; apparently he wanted to do it as much as Billy did.

Steve got his lube out for the third time and then got his fingers back into Billy; he kinda curled 'em up right away this time and it made Billy's whole body short-circuit – he started coming really hard without meaning to: Steve wasn't even touchin' his dick or anything. Steve muttered, “Oh, fuck, okay;” he started goin' at Billy really hard, twisting his fingers inside of him, and kept doing it even after Billy'd finished.

That actually *did* kinda hurt now because it was like way too much, almost not in a good way – he moved to grab Steve's arm and then just ended up coming a second time which didn't really happen for him; he was pretty sure he was fuckin' groaning or drooling on himself like he was havin' a seizure.

Billy came and came and everything slowed down for a real long time – he felt like he was really stoned for a couple seconds, minutes really, almost like he wasn't in his body again. Steve finally pulled his fingers out and shifted away on the bed, then laid down on his side looking at Billy. He wiped his hand off on the mattress which was so lovely and just laid there starin'. “Um, did you die?”

“Uhhhahahaha,” Billy said. Okay he was back in his body again. He felt like he had about three fuckin' pounds of come on himself and he couldn't really move too much; he should probably feel way grosser. He reached out and grabbed Steve's arm since it was the closest thing. “Shit, man,” he mumbled; Steve laughed.

They didn't talk for a while, just laying there. Billy breathed in and out, waitin' for his heartbeat to slow down. The room felt like it was spinning even though he definitely wasn't drunk anymore; he watched the lights from the stupid lava lamp bounce slowly across the ceiling.

“Uh, are you – so that was good, right?” Steve said finally. He sounded kinda breathless too – his hair was all crazy and t-shirt was messed up and there was jizz on that too. Apparently it was everywhere.

“Yeah, my ass hurts now though,” Billy told him; Steve huffed out a laugh like he was surprised or something.

“God, I'm, uh, I'm sorry. You were like really hot.”

Billy thought about it and decided he could try to move again. He flopped out on his side too and got his hands on Steve's belt buckle. “All right, I can do ya now.” He still wanted to get Steve off even though he'd already finished (twice); really he thought it was kinda stupid that they kept havin' to like take turns and all. If Steve wanted to just fuck him or whatever, they could like do that, and then they'd

both get off together.

In theory anyway. He didn't know if Steve would really wanna do that. He hadn't like tried to stick it in yet or nothing. It was a big theory – Billy thought about it a lot; he was pretty sure he could take it. He started undoing the belt.

“Um, HEH,” Steve said in all loud his face like a weirdo; he grabbed Billy's arm to stop him. “Uh, yeah, no, I'm, I'm good, I – that's okay.”

“What?” Okay but now he felt kinda weird or somethin', like maybe Steve actually hadn't been that into it or whatever. Maybe he wasn't even hard anymore; Billy almost felt hurt, and really dumb. “Why not?”

“I just ... uh, you don't have to, to do that.”

“You don't want me to get you off?” Billy asked him; he still felt stupid.

“Uh – yeah, no, it's not – I – ” Steve stuttered out. He was still holding Billy's forearm away from himself like he was gonna get burned or something. “I already ... uh ... I already ... ” He looked down between them and then looked back up at Billy.

Billy didn't really understand for a second. “But I can still – hang on,” he said slowly, then he got it. Holy god. “Shut up, are you serious, man?”

Steve made a really great face; it was like the squinty-face maximized to a thousand. “Okay, asshole, you really can't say shit to me – ”

“HAHAHAHA!”

“God, can you not, like, ruin our moment or whatever?” Steve demanded all cranky. “I just got you off *two times*, this is a big deal for me.”

Billy couldn't help it; he had to ruin the moment. “Fuck, Steve, did you fuckin' cream your pants?” he asked in thrall; Steve's squinty-face maximized to a like million.

“Okay, you act like you've never – ”

“FUCKING SHIT, MAN!” Billy said happily. Oh shit was so good. “Oh, my *fucking* god, you're such a – ”

“Fuck off!” Steve told him. “What the fuck was I supposed to, uh, you were like, like moaning like you were in a sex tape or something, I couldn't – ”

“Seen a lot of those, haven't ya?”

Harrington gasped like a dramatic bitch. “I – shut up!”

“HAHAHAHA!”

“Fuck off, I made you come twice, you can't say shit to me,” Steve muttered all grouchy.

“When'd you come? Steve! Out in the living room? Huh? Eatin' your food?” Billy demanded; Steve pinched him *really* hard and Billy laughed some more. “ASSHOLE!”

“God, you're such a dick.” He didn't really sound that mad though. “Jesus, how long are you going to laugh about it? I feel really slimy, this is fucking gross. You're so *mean*, you prick.”

“I didn't do shit to you,” Billy told him; he really hadn't for once. Hahahaha! It was great. Holy god, he felt all proud and shit. “Didn't think I had such an effect on you.”

“GOD, I hate you, you're so mean, I just felt sorry for you.” Steve was so cranky.

“Oh, do you usually come in your pants when you feel sorry for people?” Billy asked him; Steve tried to smother him with two pillows. “HEHEHE!” Billy screamed.

He fought Steve off and pulled the pillows offa his face. He sat up wiped his chest and stomach off as best he could, then found his boxers on the floor. Harrington was layin' on his back now and Billy stretched out and looked at him. “I'm like real fragile right now, you coulda really hurt me,” he said solemnly.

Steve laughed. "Shut up. Are you done yet?"

"Guess so." Honestly, he felt kinda disappointed – he'd still really wanted to suck Harrington off, or at least touch 'im a little. Maybe they'd go again later. "What time's it?"

Steve leaned across Billy to look at his wristwatch in the light; somehow it was nine forty-five already. "Ah, man, getting pretty late for me," Harrington said like a little nerd. He always woke and got up way earlier than Billy, even when Billy had to go meet Henderson. Steve flopped out on top of him even though they were both super gross right now, kissed his shoulder a couple times. "Hey, that was okay, right?"

Billy knew he meant the fingering thing even though they never really talked about it "Yeah, I asked you for it."

"Okay, well. I liked it, obviously." Steve had his eyes closed; Billy stretched up and kissed his eyebrows since his cute face was right there. Steve started smiling one of his drippy smiles and Billy resigned himself to bein' talked to death again.

Steve brushed Billy's hair away from his face and kissed his mouth a couple times. "What are we doin' this weekend, you wanna go somewhere?"

"Yeah, if you want."

"Uh, do you wanna, like, we could, do you wanna go bowling or something?" Steve asked him in a funny voice; Billy felt immediately suspicious.

"Why, you wanna?"

"Ah, maybe, I dunno. We could go, like, Saturday night if you wanted."

Billy felt even more suspicious. He wasn't even sure if he and Harrington went out on actual dates or whatever now – they just went out together, and Steve never really made some big fuss askin' him and saying *Uh* and *Like* and *I dunno*. "Need more'n two people to go bowling."

“Well, we could – we could take the kids, or, you know, I could ask Alex – “ Steve said. Billy moaned loudly; he'd figured Harrington was gonna bring up his little chatty friend. “Come on, he's not that bad! He likes you, he thinks you're funny.”

“I am funny,” Billy told him. He was trying not to make a face: Jesus god, they both talked so fucking much. Steve was probably gonna try and bring Henderson too and Billy'd be suffering all night. With much pain, he said, “You can bring 'im if you want.”

“He was just talking about it, we don't have to go,” Steve told him. “It might be fun, I wasn't gonna tell him about us.”

The things Billy did for love. The bowling alley was totally for shit in this town, too. “I said we can go.”

“Why don't you ask, like, Kasia and her girlfriend, we could do a big thing. We could double-date or whatever.”

Steve was too funny. Actually, that might work – everybody'd been all over each other at the party a couple nights ago, but Kasia wasn't stupid: she knew what kinda town Hawkins was. She *had* told Billy that they should all hang out again. “Yeah, I'll ask her when I go to class.”

“Yeah, you wanna?” Steve sounded surprised again; Billy didn't know why.

“Sure. You probably gotta pay for everybody.”

Harrington laughed at him. “That's okay, I was already planning to.”

“Okay.” Billy thought about it; he guessed it wouldn't be too bad. “Might be fun.”

“Cool, that's great, really?” Christ but Steve sounded all happy and shit; he shouldn't sound that happy about going fuckin' bowling with Billy and his little queer friends.

“She might have plans already.”

Steve just shrugged and shifted over a little bit so's that he wasn't

totally crushing Billy anymore. "That's all right, we can always try for another time. You'll still have Alex," he said kindly; Billy sighed and Steve smiled at him. "Okay, next weekend's the carnival, we can go to that too if you want."

"Yeah, gonna take me on the Ferris Wheel?" Billy asked him.

"Ha, ha. We can go on the Gravi-tron, I get motion sickness though. Just, uh, a warning." Billy struggled with all his might not to make a comment and Steve laughed. "Oh, my god, your fuckin' face, I was *joking*. Well, mostly," he said as an afterthought. "We gotta go on Friday night, they stamp your hand and you can go on the rides 'til two am," he said all intense like a huge nerd. "I can win you like four stuffed animals."

"Fuck off, I'll win you somethin'. You want a teddy?"

"Mm, I liked that lizard that Max got me, she showed me a picture she took before Dustin killed it," Steve said thoughtfully. Jesus God. "It'll be really fun, you'll like it. Oh, we can take El or something, I think she'd be okay there. And then we could – uh, I talked to my aunt, she said we could have her place at the end of the month, did you ask off of work yet?"

He kinda sounded like a den dad or Mr. Mom again, tryin' to run Billy's life; Billy didn't mind. "Yeah, I talked to Hank already."

"What about Max?"

"Uh, she said – " He tried to think back to all the shit Max'd been squawking about the other week, when they'd been camping and then when they'd been out at the movies. He couldn't believe that all that shit had been just a week ago – it felt all mushed together in his head; so much had happened in a couple days. "Think after the 21st she's off 'til school starts again."

"Oh, nice, so she's got like three weeks? We can have the place til after Labor Day, we could stay for like a whole week if you want."

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Do you really wanna go?" Steve asked him.

Billy didn't know why Harrington thought he wouldn't wanna take off work for a whole week and stay at some fancy fuckin' beach-house. Well lake-house but whatever. "Yeah, man, we been plannin' this shit all summer."

"No, I know that. I just, uh, I don't know, I – "

"Okay, so you know or you don't know?"

Steve made a face. "Shut up," he told Billy; truly he was rude as hell. "I'm just, you know, asking you. You think you can really hang out with me for eight days? We'd practically be, like, living together," he said, as if that was bad or somethin', and not Billy's second-biggest fantasy.

"Guess you'll find out."

They kissed some more, for a while, and then Steve decided that everything was too disgusting – "Okay, you're, like, stickin' to me, and I'm stickin' to myself, I feel totally gross." Billy'd been there; he used all his goodwill and tried not to tease 'im too much.

Steve went off to the bathroom and Billy got up and got dressed again too. He felt kinda gross too even though he'd showered earlier: it wasn't exactly fun to have lube tricklin' out of your asshole – it was a whole new feeling and Billy wasn't sure how he felt again. It was fine when they were actually messing around and shit, but afterwards he felt pretty weird or, like, almost used-up or whatever; he wondered if this was how chicks felt.

He'd figured that Harrington would wanna try and get to sleep after he got out of the shower but they decided to watch a movie instead since Steve still had *Alien* rented out until the weekend. He had another pair of his dorky pajama-bottoms on; these ones were *Star Wars*.

Billy got the movie set up while Steve went and fucked around in the kitchen again. He still wasn't even hungry but Steve said that they needed snacks since they was watchin' the TV; Billy guessed that was sound logic.

Harrington got his chips and his popcorn and his soda set up on the couch and they settled down together with the lights off – Steve spent about three minutes tryin' to balance his Coke on the arm of the sofa and then just gave up and put it down on the floor. “You okay?” he asked Billy again even though he'd just fucking promised to stop askin' that shit. “Tired?”

“I guess,” Billy said anyway. He actually *was* tired as fuck – he felt totally drained still. It was only Wednesday and he was already waitin' for the weekend, hopefully with Steve.

“It's kind of a long movie,” Harrington told him like a little dork; he'd already said that he'd never even fuckin' seen *Alien*.

“I'm good.” He leaned heavily against Steve's shoulder and Steve picked up the remote.

It had been such a goddamn long week already – seemed like he and Harrington hadn't been alone in about a century, even though it'd only been like three days. Just being here with him on the couch and doin' something simple like watching the TV in the dark and pretendin' they was at the movies made Billy feel really good, even with the loss of the coffee table and shit. It almost even made him feel better than the sex stuff had, but just almost.

They watched *Alien* for a couple minutes and Harrington started inhaling all his food at rapid speed like some kinda sex god. Billy combed a hand through Steve's hair, across the longer bits of it that fell down the back of his neck. It'd got all crazy from when Billy'd been grabbing him earlier in the throes of passion or whatever. “Hey, I love you,” he blurted out without really meaning to. He just wanted to tell 'im; it felt so easy to say it.

Steve had been shoveling a fistful of potato chips in his mouth so naturally he looked really great. His eyes got kinda big like Billy'd stabbed him or said he wanted to get married or some shit. He looked totally freaked out for a second, even though he'd just spent the better part of an hour making Billy come *twice* and then spent twenty more minutes saying all his corny bullshit about the carnival and goin' to the lake or whatever. Billy was such a fucking moron; he ate up that stupid shit with a goddamn spoon like a twelve-year-old girl

gettin' flirted with for the first time.

The silence stretched out between them and Steve turned his head to look at Billy. "I, uhh – yeah, me too," he said in this stilted voice around the potato chips. There was another awkward pause where neither of them said anything again and the TV felt too loud.

It kinda made Billy feel dumb as shit even though he hadn't, like, said it to make Steve say it back or whatever. He'd just wanted to say it. Steve had said *You know, I, I, I love you* a couple frickin' days ago, but it didn't have to be some big thing. Maybe he'd just been feeling real sorry for Billy after all and Billy was a big goddamn idiot. It was just that he'd just kinda thought that, you know, with everything – well, it was whatever. *Me too* was okay, he guessed, totally fine.

Steve turned towards him again and got this real big smile on his face; Billy couldn't tell if it was fake or not. He leaned over and kissed Billy hard before he could get all grumpy or whatever, then slung an arm around Billy's shoulder.

Billy didn't really know what else to say now so he put his face against Steve's neck and kept watchin' the TV. Maybe it wasn't a big thing. "Uh, wait, so what happens to the cat?" Steve asked suddenly so Billy guessed they were goin' on like normal.

"Just watch it," Billy told him. He felt kinda sulky or stupid or whatever; he seized the popcorn bowl and stuffed his face until he felt a little better. Steve was still right here, and *Alien* was still a good movie, so at least there was that.

Notes for the Chapter:

- Sorry that this took me so long to post; I was really struggling with the length because I had other things I'd wanted to write and I could *not* fit them in, so they will be for later now. Remember in my first fic, when I'd write a whole month going by? Lolz.

- I want to say that I have never actually have to file a police report, or send anyone to jail, but I know people who have. I've tried to make it as accurate as I know how; sorry if I've written anything incorrectly. This part was really difficult for me to write, probably the toughest so far! Next chapter will mostly be fluff and actual sex so hopefully it won't take as long. Thanks for everyone who is reading, especially my little cheerleaders. ;)

17. Chapter Seventeen

Summary for the Chapter:

Steve still felt cranky and everything but at least there was cake. Aside from Mrs. Wheeler, Joyce was probably the best cook out of all the moms. Steve was pretty sure that the biggest thing he missed about going around with Nancy was getting to eat dinner with her folks. She and Mike would always get into some big argument and then Steve would get to eat all their food, too.

Chapter Seventeen

“Yeah, Billy's not gonna do that,” Steve said.

“He would if you asked him!” Dustin was about six inches away from his face, staring at him like a total lunatic.

“Yeah, no. Sorry, it's not gonna happen.”

“Steve! Why not?”

Steve laughed incredulously (he also reached out and shoved Dust back a couple inches). “Uh, because I know him, and he's not gonna do that.”

“Okay, but if *you* asked him – ”

“Why would I ask him, I don't want to do it either.”

“Steve!” Dustin was right back in his face so Steve pushed him away again; Dust made a sound like an flustered chicken. It was late on Monday afternoon and they were hanging at Steve's place, killing time before Dust went off to meet Becca and Steve went off to meet Billy. Dustin hadn't called or anything but he still usually showed up once or twice a week to chill and eat all of Steve's food. He'd gotten real comfortable as soon as he'd walked in – right now he had his

sneakers off and everything. “Seriously? Quit shoving me!” He flailed his stinky feet.

“Quit getting in my face!”

“Oh my god, *why* do you have an attitude with me right now?” Dustin asked in his usual dramatic fashion. He slugged at Steve's shoulder after he got another shove. “STOP! Mike will probably let you play this time too!”

Steve rolled his eyes – he'd wanted to try and catch the news before he headed out. He didn't know why he had even bothered to put the TV on because Dust always talked way too much, usually even more so when the TV was on. “I don't want to play anymore, you guys just frickin' yell at me the whole time.” He tried not to sound like he was grumbling but he probably was.

“Okay, not *me*,” Dust said; Steve stared at him and didn't answer. “What! It's mostly Lucas and Mike! And it's just because you don't pay attention to the rules of the campaign!”

“Yeah, because there's too many rules, and they're all frickin' stupid.” Steve felt super cranky – Mike was like basically a dictator. “Look, Bill's not going to play D&D with you guys.”

“He would if *you* asked him!” Dust said for the third or fourth time. “Come on, I made a character for him six months ago!”

That was really touching. Actually, the most fun thing about Dungeons and Dragons was making your character or whatever, but Bill probably wouldn't care about that part. “Why do you want him to play so bad all of a sudden?”

“I don't, I always want you guys to play,” Dustin told him patiently. That was total crap because he'd basically kicked Steve out of the campaign as soon as he'd convinced Becca to start playing with the rest of the kids last winter. If Steve hadn't had Bill to start hangin' out with all the time, he'd have felt really insulted.

Dust leaned forward again. “I just want Billy to have fun, don't you think he would have fun? You guys are isolating yourselves!”

Steve gave up on trying to watch the news and put the TV on mute, then smacked Dustin in the leg with the remote. “Jesus, can you, like, sit like a normal frickin’ person and stop crawling on me?” Steve asked (“I’M NOT!” roared Dust). “We’re not, ah, isolating ourselves, we’re, we’re doing stuff.”

He wasn’t going to elaborate on what the *stuff* was. Really he shouldn’t have to: Dustin was pretty serious with Becca, for a couple months now, at least – Steve didn’t know why Dust didn’t seem to understand that he and Billy might want some time alone to do ... you know, things, and to not be around a bunch of fifteen-year-olds all the time. Steve didn’t want to hurt Dustin’s feelings or anything, but he *was* fifteen. When Steve thought about a fun night with Bill, it exactly didn’t involve playing D&D.

“Okay, what stuff?” Dust asked anyway; Steve gave him a look and Dustin made a face. “*Sick!*” he cried like a little asshole.

“Man, shut the hell up, you just asked me – ”

“What, okay, you didn’t get enough of that when you two were sneaking around for three months?”

Steve felt even crankier. “Yeah, no, not really, not with you showing up and knocking on my goddamn front door every single day.”

“That is *not* my fault, Steve, I did not know you guys were physically involved at the time!” Dust yapped. “Oh, my god, it would be for like one night, I think you’ll survive.”

Jesus H. They were just gonna keep going around and around for forever. “Look, Bill’s not gonna play D&D with you guys,” Steve said again. Billy thought that stuff was totally lame, at least Steve was pretty sure. “He’s not into crap like that.”

“Right, that’s weird, so who beat *Castlevania* with me yesterday?”

Okay. Well. “That’s different, that’s, you know, like, a, a video game.”

“Oh really? Is it?” Dust asked him; Steve made a face. “It’s an RPG, Steve! It’s the *same thing*, in a different medium!”

Steve didn't know about all that. He *did* know that he was really sick of arguing. Dustin did not get sick of arguing, though – they could be here all night.

He breathed out heavily through his huge nose and tried not to feel too annoyed. “All right, look, I'll ask him about it, but don't get your hopes up, okay?”

“OKAY, REALLY?” Dust said all excited, clearly getting his hopes up. “Ask him tonight, Mike has to plan the campaign! He said that he needs to know if – ”

“When the hell are you guys even playin'?”

“Uh, we usually do it over the weekend, we're postponing because of the carnival though,” Dust informed him. “Hey, we're still going, right? Are you taking Billy?”

“Yeah, I mean, I guess so.”

Dustin got this really horrible grin on his face. “Oh, okay. Like on a date?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Man, you know we can't really do that shit here.” He'd joked about winning Billy a stuffed bear and all, but he wasn't actually going to do that (well, unless Bill really wanted one. But Steve was pretty sure the only stuffed animal Billy would ever want would be, like, a decapitated one or something).

“Oh. Right, I guess not.” Dustin's face fell for him, then he brightened again after another second. “But unofficially, it's a date, right? I'm bringing Rebecca, you're taking Billy, so we can – ”

“Yeah, are you bringing her? That's funny, I thought I was picking you guys up.”

“Whatever, you know what I mean! We can coordinate our outfits again!”

Okay, they'd only done that like one time. Steve chewed on his lip and barely managed not to be an asshole. He *had* told Dust that he'd take the kids to the fair. “Okay, sure.” At least it meant he could stop

Dustin from wearing that horrible jean vest of his. Probably. Maybe. Dust wore that thing a lot.

“So ... how's he been, anyway?” Dust asked him; Steve guessed they were back to talking about Billy.

“I don't know, you just saw him yesterday.”

Dustin rolled his eyes which Steve didn't really feel was necessary. “Yesterday was about the video game,” he said like Steve was dumb (also unnecessary). “And I saw him this morning, we went running again.”

Oh right. “Okay, so why didn't you ask *him* about it?”

“Oh, right, sure, because Billy loves to tell me about his life!” Dust yapped. “Are you kidding? Every time I ask him a personal question, he makes me do twenty push-ups!” He pulled a face when Steve started laughing. “Yeah! It's hilarious! He was even more *psycho* than usual today, is he like totally freaking out or whatever?”

Steve didn't answer for a moment and he stopped laughing. He knew that Dust probably wanted details and all but he didn't know what to tell him; it didn't feel right. “He's – ah, no, you know, he's okay.”

“Max said that her mom kicked his dad out last week.”

“Yeah, honestly, she could probably tell you way more than me,” Steve admitted.

“What, you guys didn't talk about it or anything?” Dust asked him. “You were there.”

“Sure, we talked about it.” He didn't really know what to say – he wasn't going to give Dustin a play-by-play of Billy's big brawl with his dad or whatever, or tell him about how Bill had broke down and cried later in Steve's bedroom for almost an *hour*. “You heard us last week, Hop put his dad in jail.”

“Uh, I guess.” Dust looked disappointed at the lack of new intel. “Isn't he back out now though?”

“Yeah, but he can't like come around or anything.”

“I guess,” Dust said again. He furrowed his brow and got right back in Steve's face again. “But, so how the hell is Billy okay, that's his dad.”

“Yeah, well, he doesn't act like somebody's dad,” Steve said, probably too sharply. He added, “You should know about that,” then felt like a massive dick. Dustin still thought that his dad was pretty great and all, but he lived way out in Springfield now and he was never around. Once Mrs. Henderson had told Steve that he didn't even pay child support anymore.

Dust didn't seem hurt or anything though. “I guess,” he said again. “We've all been talking about it.”

“Great, that's really wonderful.”

“Okay, you know what I mean!”

“I *guess*,” Steve echoed obnoxiously; Dustin made a face at him.

Anyway, whatever. Billy was fine, Steve guessed, or at least now he was, or would be. So much stuff had happened over the last week with Bill's dad and Steve didn't like thinking about it, even though he pretty much had to think about it. How could he not – he'd seen it.

It was one thing to kind of know that your boyfriend's dad smacked him around a lot; it was a totally different thing to actually be right there, seeing it happen. It had been pretty terrifying or horrifying or, well, or another adjective that Steve couldn't think up right now. Then the way Bill had acted after had been – even scarier, really. Steve kept thinking about Billy going through the frickin' table and how he'd looked when he'd been hitting his old man, and then how he'd looked later at Steve's house, sitting around like a zombie with his hands and his face all fucked up.

It was just awful because Steve had thought so many times that he'd never let Bill get hit or hurt or smacked around again, as if Steve could protect him or something. He couldn't do anything really. It was total shit.

He'd only ever actually seen Billy's dad like one time before, so he guessed he'd felt really tough or whatever. He'd thought a bunch of times to himself that he'd love to get five minutes alone with the creep, or about what he'd do if Billy's dad ever started something with him again. And then last week had happened and Steve had just sat there like a moron. He still felt like he should have done more, even though he wasn't exactly sure what it was he was supposed to do.

Well, he'd been *trying*. To be there or whatever if Billy needed him or wanted to talk, even though Billy hated doing that, especially about his dad or his family. Bill had called the police on his dad which was something Steve couldn't imagine himself ever doing, or even really imagine *Billy* ever doing, or anyone. Hopper wanted Bill to press charges but Billy said that he wasn't sure yet and his stepmom wasn't sure yet either. Steve didn't see why they *wouldn't* press charges; there had to be some way to get rid of the guy.

Mostly he just wanted Billy to feel normal and for things to be normal again, not that anything had really been *normal* for about two years now. The new normal: whatever passed as normal for him and Billy in post-Upside Down Hawkins. Normal was good – he and Bill had been so good lately, and Steve was determined to make sure things kept on being good. Billy always knew how to make him feel okay so Steve could do the same thing, or try to at least.

He'd been really trying and he'd been trying not to ask Bill too many questions or whatever, even though he was dying to know about everything that was going on. It felt weird or crappy to just ask Max about it. He and Billy had hung out pretty much all weekend and Bill had seemed okay: Friday night they'd went to the movies together, and on Saturday they'd gone out to the bowling alley with a couple people, Alex and Kyle and Bill's friend Kasia from class and her cute girlfriend and one of their roommates.

Kyle was still kind of an asshole but Steve had thought they'd had a pretty good time and nobody'd slugged each other. Even though they were the same age, Bill had been a year behind Steve in school – they didn't really have too many friends in common to hang out with, aside from the Monster Squad. It was nice to just go out for a night without a bunch of kids.

Steve was pretty sure that Bill was just tolerating Alex but they didn't need to be best friends or anything. That was totally okay – if Billy really liked *everyone*, then Steve would feel way less, like, special or whatever. Anyway, Bill had been a lot nicer once Steve had told him that Alex had been his friend since he was thirteen. And it was kind of funny to see him with his girls from class – he'd basically spent all night hitting on Kasia's girlfriend Maria and showin' her how to do her bowling throws, even though they'd done girls against guys which had meant Bill was helping the other team.

"You're a flirt," Steve had told him when they'd gone up together to get soda for the girls.

"Am I?"

"Yeah, kind of."

"I can't really hit on you here," Billy had said; Steve guessed that was true enough.

He'd taken Bill back to his place on Saturday night after everyone had parted ways. Not being able to touch Billy or really be with him how he'd wanted to at the bowling alley had almost been unbearable – Steve had practically frickin' thrown him into the house, then had thought he really shouldn't be so aggressive.

It wasn't fair though. Steve knew that Hawkins was a small town and he knew that everybody didn't think the way he did. He wasn't *that* stupid – he knew that he and Bill weren't on a real date or whatever and that they couldn't hang all over each other like they had a couple weeks ago when they'd been out in the woods with just Max there. He didn't want Billy to have to pretend to be hitting on some girl when they were out together; he wanted everyone to know that Billy was *his*. He still didn't need to throw him around, though, even if Bill didn't really seem to mind.

Steve's mom hadn't been home which had been good because they'd gotten kind of loud. They weren't really talking about it, but Sunday morning was a week since all the shit had gone down with Bill's dad, and Steve had just thought that maybe Billy wouldn't want to be at his place. They'd just laid around in the den and played video games

all day. Dust had come over before noon and they'd spent like five hours beating *Castlevania* and then Steve had bought them all dinner. Bill had driven Dustin home at nine and he'd said *Come over tomorrow, I'll make ya something* so Steve was waiting to go over.

Dust lost interest in talking about Billy but he still blabbed on for about forever – he had a lot of stuff to say about the weekend – and then he yelled at Steve for not telling him that it was past six o'clock, as if Steve could get a frickin' word in edgewise. “Oh, great, Steve, we missed first dinner! Rebecca's going to murder me, I can only stay over until eight o'clock on weeknights now! She's supposed to look at my SUMMER READING ESSAY!” Dust hopped up from the couch all crazy and ran off to find his shoes. Steve took a few seconds to relish the silence – it was so rare now.

Dustin popped his head back around the doorframe to the den in two seconds. He looked like a chipmunk or something. “Uh, Steve, HELLO, are you just gonna sit there all night? Are you coming or what? I thought you wanted to see your *man*.”

Jesus H, he was so annoying. Steve turned the TV off. “Yeah, okay, I'm coming.”

He drove Dustin down to the end of Broad Street and dropped him off close to Rebecca's house – she only lived a couple blocks away from Max and Bill's parents. “Tell Billy I say hi!” Dust said as he slammed the Beamer's door shut and trotted off.

Steve parked his car alongside the empty lot by the park and wandered slowly up the road to Bill's apartment complex. He waved at the annoying old guy with the two collies that Bill was so obsessed with; really he didn't look like Kevin Costner at all. It was a little past seven now, and even though it wasn't humid outside or anything, the sun was blotted out with grey and it looked like it was going to rain again. Steve thought he probably should have brought a jacket.

He rounded the corner of Broad just in time to see Jonathan Byers leaving through the front door of the apartment building. That was really just so wonderful, truly – it was so great. It made no sense but

Steve's heart sank in two seconds and he almost wanted to *go away* right away. He stopped walking and stood there feeling totally trapped for a moment. There was nobody else on the street – God, they were gonna have to *talk*.

Jonathan's thin hair was falling into his eyes and he had a smile on his face as he stepped out onto the sidewalk. It was really great – Steve wondered what exactly Jonathan frickin' Byers had to be smiling about as he left Billy's apartment and then told himself to stop. Okay. He really didn't need to do this shit right now.

Jonathan had his stupid camera dangling around his neck and a bookbag over one shoulder; he stopped walking when he looked up and saw Steve too. “Oh. Hey,” he said like he was surprised or something.

It felt super weird. They both just stood there about ten feet apart. “Hey, man.” Somehow Steve managed not to run down the street screaming.

“I was just coming from, uh – “ Jonathan made a strange aborted motion over his shoulder, curled a hand around the strap of his bookbag. “I was – ”

“What are you doin' here?”

Jonathan's weird pointy eyebrows went up and Steve guessed he hadn't really sounded very *nice*. He probably sounded like a frickin' police officer or something. “I just had to – I was dropping some stuff off. They're both up there, uh, Max and Billy.”

“Right. Thanks,” Steve said like a moron or a police officer.

They kept on standing there like idiots on the sidewalk for a few seconds; it felt like about five minutes passing. Steve felt pretty stupid – he guessed he never really knew what to say to Jonathan, after everything that had happened. What could he say. When Steve had been a kid, his mom had always rapped him on the head when she'd take him somewhere and told him, *If you can't say something nice, don't say anything*. That was from some Disney movie, too, Steve was pretty sure. What could he say.

He guessed that Jonathan pretty much had the same feelings towards him: maybe he'd been trained in a similar way. "Weird weather we're having," he said after an excruciating eight million years of them staring each other down like they were in an old Western or something.

"Yeah, really," Steve said. He was the world's most brilliant conversationalist. He was busy wondering what kinda stuff Jonathan had to drop off to Max and to Billy, anyway. "Probably gonna rain all week."

"Yeah," Jonathan said too. He was still fiddling around with his stupid camera. "Uh, I'm actually late for work, so, yeah, I gotta –"

"Right, okay."

"Uh, see ya."

"Yeah."

They both started walking again at the same time and had to awkwardly step around each other on the sidewalk; Steve was way too stupidly aware of his body for a moment. He went on into the building and started up the stairs in the hall. The air-conditioning in the lobby and stairwell wasn't on because it wasn't hot enough outside which didn't really happen in August, and the air felt dead and stagnant (that had been an SAT word, also was only worth nine points in Scrabble, unless you got a double letter or a bonus word or whatever).

Okay. He was trying not to feel weird or annoyed or let seeing Jonathan for thirty seconds ruin his whole frickin' night. It didn't matter anyway; he was being stupid. God, there was something like really wrong with him – Billy was allowed to have friends or whatever. He *should* have friends, other people he could hang out with or talk to who weren't Steve or his kid sister.

Steve didn't really see why one of the friends had to be *Jonathan Byers*, though. It was too stupid. Billy always acted like he hated Jonathan, but then again, Bill always acted like he hated everybody, so that didn't necessarily mean anything: Steve had seen them talking

together once or twice, back when Billy had still been in school. Jonathan had been at Bill's apartment when Billy hadn't even been talking to Steve. He'd let Jonathan take that record home before, too, last month or whatever.

He'd probably just come by to drop it off back or something. There was no law that said that he couldn't do that just because Steve was going out with Billy now, so – wait did he actually know that Steve was going out with Billy? That made Steve feel kind of weird too. Was he supposed to, like, acknowledge it or something. He'd just figured that, like, what with Will and Nancy and all the kids and everything that had been going on, Jonathan probably would have heard something. That was okay, but it wasn't like he and *Steve* were friends either.

He and Billy probably had way more stuff in common. They both had crappy dads and were super smart and liked the same music and read actual books and shit. Maybe Bill would even be, like, great friends with Jonathan if Steve wasn't around to talk shit on him all the time, not that he meant to. That was annoying. Steve bet they'd talked about that stupid record for like ten minutes; he still didn't even know what it was. He wondered if Bill had shown Jonathan the record player that Steve'd got him. He wondered if they –

Okay wow he was doing the thing again, he was definitely doing the thing. Stupid. Stop. Stop. *Stop*, he told himself; he mentally rapped himself on the head like his mom gettin' annoyed at him.

Steve got up the stairs and made his way down the little hallway to Bill's place. He could hear music blaring loudly from behind the apartment door, some distorted guitar, so he just unlocked it and went on in instead of knocking; he felt way better and about eighty percent more normal as soon as he opened the door up. They had the AC on anyway because Max and Bill were, like, amazed by actual air-conditioning; they'd probably have their wall-units cranked to full blast in the middle of winter.

There was a light on in the kitchen but the living room was dark aside from these white Christmas-lights that somebody'd rigged up over the bookshelf by the window. Billy was laying down collapsed across the couch with his heavy boots dangling off the arm of it,

eating a bunch of candy with the remote on his stomach. Across the room, Max was bustling around over in the kitchenette doing a million things with her frizzy hair getting everywhere.

She looked up from her pots and pans as Steve closed the door back up. "WOW, FINALLY, SOMEONE NOT USELESS WALKS IN," she said loudly over the music. That was such a ringing endorsement; Steve tried not to feel too touched. "Hey!"

Bill looked up from the TV. "Hey man."

"Steve, can you help me?"

"Yeah, sure." Steve put his keys down.

Max was making spaghetti and meatballs in the mysterious Crock-Pot (Steve still didn't remember Mrs. Henderson letting them have it, but it looked about a thousand years old), and there was sauce bubbling over in a pan on one of the back burners of the stove too, spattering red dots onto the wall behind it. Steve followed her over to the sink and helped her drain her pasta; it was the bow-tie kind. It took them couple minutes of tricky maneuvering to do it by holding the lid over the top of the pot, and Max almost dropped everything twice.

"Jesus, all right. Don't you guys have a strainer or anything?" he asked her after she'd spilled boiling water and about a quarter of the noodles on his shirt.

Max wrinkled her nose up and huffed. "We *did*, my mom borrowed it last week and melted it by accident."

"What, are you serious?" She made another face and didn't answer which made Steve laugh. "Okay, do you need me to do somethin' else?"

She considered him critically. "No, I guess I'm almost done."

"Okay." He went back on into the living room; Bill shifted over a little so that Steve could sit down, then he put his head in Steve's lap.

"Hey."

“Hey,” Steve said back. He put a hand in Billy's curly hair.

Bill waved his Crunch bar in Steve's face. “Want some?”

Steve had to try not to feel touched again. “I'm okay.”

“Your loss,” Bill told him seriously. “You look nice,” he added.

“Thanks,” Steve said. He was pretty sure Bill was probably teasing him for wearing a polo shirt (it was brown and had white stripes on the sleeves), but he could take a compliment.

Billy looked nice too, and not particularly *psycho* or whatever, like Dust had said earlier. Maybe a little tired because it was a Monday: he had these dark half-moon circles under his eyes. He was still wearing his clothes from working at the shop – grease-marks on his blue t-shirt and a rip in the collar. Steve watched him stuff more candy in his mouth.

“God, do you *ever* stop eating?” Max said darkly from the kitchen.

Bill ignored her and crinkled up the wrapper. “Took ya long enough to get over here.”

Steve twisted his hand in Billy's hair. “Yeah, I didn't know what time you got off work.”

“Coulda called me.”

“I had Dustin over buggin' me, do you really make him do sit-ups when he asks you a question?” Steve asked; he waited patiently while Bill laughed like a demon. “What happened, I thought you were making me something.”

“I was, shithead got too excited and took over.”

“STOP CALLING ME THAT,” Max went off; a pot slammed on the stove. “He only did like two things and was being a huge asshole!” she said to Steve.

“Yeah, because you *fucking burned me*,” Bill told her all loud. He fanned his arm out in a dramatic way to show Steve. “Look at this

shit, man.” He had a blotchy red mark on his forearm about the size of a silver-dollar.

Steve wrapped his fingers around Billy's wrist and tried not to grin. “Mm, wow. Yeah, that looks pretty bad.”

“She abuses me.”

“I didn't *do anything!*” Max squawked. “You were in my way!”

He turned Billy's wrist over. “Do you need me to take you to the hospital?”

Bill rolled his eyes; he had his nice Steve-smile on his face though. “Think I'll be okay.”

“Okay. If you're sure.”

“God, I'm going to vomit, you two are worse than El and *Mike*,” Max lamented; Steve felt really insulted. “Can you guys just go away?”

“Man, I dunno if you remember, I fucking live here,” Billy reminded her.

Max ignored him too and clattered some dishes around. “Food's done,” she announced, shuffling over with a huge plate; she had spaghetti sauce on her striped tank top. She collapsed onto the loveseat across from the boys and then made a face. “Did you see Creepazoid leaving?” she asked Steve.

Oh man. It was great. Steve had been doing so good with not even mentioning Jonathan – he'd been trying so hard. He hadn't even been going to ask about him. “Yeah, what was he doing here, anyway?”

“His mom made him bring a bunch of food over,” Max told him.

Mrs. Byers was great and all but that was kinda weird. “Uh, why?”

“Joyce is like dating Hopper now, she knows everything about me and Billy and his dad.”

“Prolly feels sorry for us,” Bill put in.

Steve bet that Billy must really love that. Also: “Wait, so are they actually seein’ each other now?”

“Guess so.”

“She made a cake!”

Okay, well. Steve still felt cranky and everything but at least there was cake. Aside from Mrs. Wheeler, Joyce was probably the best cook out of all the moms. Steve was pretty sure that the biggest thing he missed about going around with Nancy was getting to eat dinner with her folks. She and Mike would always get into some big argument and then Steve would get to eat all their food, too.

There were more important things to think about than food, though – one of them was currently laying on him. Billy twisted around on Steve's lap to look up at him so Steve took his hand out of Bill's hair. “Man, what'd you buy that asshole a frickin' camera for?” Billy asked him.

“Ah, what?” Steve felt really surprised, almost taken aback. “He told you guys that?”

“Yeah, he was here for like an hour, we were talking about you,” Max mumbled around her mouthful of spaghetti.

That was great, too. “Yeah, well, it was a long time ago.”

“Jesus, it wasn't no hour,” Bill went off grumbling.

“Forty-five minutes!”

Billy squinted up at him again. “Never bought me some fancy camera,” he said; he was too funny.

God, Steve really didn't want to talk about this crap – he barely ever even thought of it anymore. He was starting to feel super weird again and he couldn't quite pinpoint why. He guessed he'd never thought he'd be talking about his great history with *Jonathan Byers* with Max and Bill.

“It wasn't that fancy,” he said; Billy just kept on lookin' at him.

“You ain't say you guys was friends before.”

Steve almost laughed. “Yeah, no, we definitely weren't,” he said. “He's not – I mean, I broke his old one, I kind of owed him.”

“Oh yeah, wasn't he like taking creepy pictures of you?” Max's fork scraped against her plate. “I forgot about that.” She stuffed some more spaghetti into her mouth and muttered, “Uck, there's too much garlic in this.”

“*What?*” Billy said, shifting on Steve's lap.

“I *said* I put too much garlic in the – ”

Steve stared at her. “How do you know about that?”

“Huh?” Max looked up, chewing. “Oh, Jonathan? Mike told me before.” Awesome.

“*What?*” Billy said again, possibly in delight. He looked over at Steve again and started to get a horrible smile on his face. “Are you kidding me?”

“It's not funny.”

Bill grinned lazily at him; Steve guessed he thought it was pretty funny. “Okay. I just didn't know you had another admirer.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Why'd he do that?” Max asked all interested.

“Don't really blame him,” Bill put in; she made a face.

Steve rolled his eyes and moved to stand up, pushing Billy off of himself. Jesus H. Okay, he definitely needed food if they were gonna make him talk about this. “He wasn't taking pictures of me, he was like, like, outside my house one night. He, he was takin' these pictures of Nancy and shit.”

“Gross!”

“Yeah, he was like, he took this picture of her through my bedroom window when we were, ah, when I was with her.”

Billy stared at him. “Are you fuckin' serious?”

“It was like back when his brother was missing.”

“Yeah, that ... actually makes it way weirder,” Max told him wisely.

“Why'd you buy him a frickin' camera?” Bill asked again.

Steve had successfully made his way over to the kitchen; he stared down at one of the empty plates Max had left out for them. “Why, are you jealous?” Billy laughed like that was really hilarious. “I don't know, I felt bad.”

There was a beat of silence and Max and Billy exchanged one of their long weird looks. Steve picked up his plate. “Okay, seriously. Don't do that.”

“You just don't make any sense,” Max said.

“What, I thought Mike told you the frickin' whole story,” Steve said; Max raised her eyebrows and didn't answer him. “I, I dunno, I thought me and Nancy were like a thing, he was takin' all those weird pictures of her. I broke his camera, I felt bad, I got him a new one.”

Max and Bill kept on lookin' at each other and not saying anything; they were super creepy sometimes. Finally Max broke the gaze and rolled her eyes over towards Steve again. She made her face that made it look like she'd swallowed a goldfish. “Right, so ... did you get him the camera before or *after* Nancy cheated on you and hooked up with him?”

Steve thunked some spaghetti down onto his plate. “Uh, before,” he said shortly.

“Jesus *Christ*, Harrington,” Billy moaned like he was in pain.

They were both making Steve feel massively stupid and he didn't want to feel stupid when he was at Bill's place. He didn't want to talk

about this. "Okay, I didn't know they were gonna – it was a long time ago," he said again; he was trying to sound casual. "Surprised he still has it."

"It looks expensive," Max commented.

"Yeah, it was." Steve got his plate all set up and they were both still looking at him. It was never going to end. "Okay, you guys don't know everything about it."

He went back over to the couch – Billy had sat up now and he was just watching Steve. He didn't look like it was that funny anymore. "You're too much, man."

Bill always made these jokes about wanting to go out the living-room window: Steve looked over at it and seriously considered it. It seemed like a pretty good plan, actually. "I don't really want to talk about this."

"Just asked you like one thing."

"Right, okay. Whatever." Steve started eating his food.

It *had* been a really long time ago: way over two years now, after Nancy had finally started talking to him again and they'd gotten back together right before Christmastime. She'd told him that she'd been thinking about getting Jonathan a present or something – you know, just because his family had been through such a hard time and all.

Steve had thought that was a good idea. He'd still felt bad about everything, not just breaking the camera. They'd gone to the mall together one night and had looked at stuff for over an hour. He still remembered the sweater Nancy'd had on – it had this blue-and-grey pattern with little silver snowflakes. He'd been really happy to be out with her; he hadn't thought he'd get another chance. They'd ended up looking at cameras at the AV store and Nancy had said *Yeah, I don't really have that much money*, so Steve had just bought it. He'd still felt bad, and it had seemed to make her really happy. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. *Just don't tell him it's from me*, he remembered he'd said. He didn't know when she had.

He felt stupid about it now, after everything. He wasn't like a total idiot, or maybe he was. It was just money, but he was very aware of the fact that he'd gone out and bought a camera for the guy who his girlfriend had later decided she liked way frickin' more than she'd liked him.

Steve put as much food into his mouth as possible; Max and Billy were *still* looking at him. "What?"

"What, you're really not going to tell us?" Max said finally.

"Tell you what?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Uh, why you bought Jonathan a brand-new camera after he was a *huge creep* to you guys."

Steve spent a couple minutes chewing. He didn't think there was too much garlic. "I don't know, I felt bad," he said again. "I didn't just break his camera, we like got into a fight and shit."

"Man, are you serious?" Billy asked him. He seemed really surprised.

"Come on, you knew about that."

Bill laughed like Steve was being real funny again. "Yeah, no, you never told me that shit."

"Sure I did." Not really. Well, in a roundabout way, maybe – he didn't know if Billy really even remembered. It was pretty embarrassing. They'd been talking one day about how messed up Bill's dad was and how people had made fun of him for it when he'd been a kid. Billy had told Steve that his dad had smacked him around real bad in front of one of his friends once and how he'd cried; Steve couldn't believe someone would make fun of him for that. Billy'd said, *What, you never said some shit about somebody's family?* and Steve had said *I guess I have*. "I, I thought, you know, I thought he and Nancy were, like, screwing around on me, I was a total asshole. I said a buncha crap about him and, and, like, his mom and stuff, everybody thought his brother had just died. I was pushin' him around and shit, he went off and decked me."

Billy just stared at him with his blue eyes all wide and Steve

wondered if he was getting ticked off or something. Bill had so many weird facial expressions; sometimes Steve couldn't read them all. "Are you serious?" he said again.

"I didn't like mean it or anything."

"Okay, but he and Nancy actually *did* screw around on you," Max put in helpfully.

Steve wanted to go out the window again. "Yeah, well, we only fought about it the one time."

Billy was *still* staring at him; Steve had no clue what the hell Bill wanted him to say. "Okay, so you won it, right?" he asked finally.

"Uh, no. Not, not really. He kind of kicked my ass." It was embarrassing to admit it but it was true after all.

Billy stared at him some more and Steve felt majorly stupid again. God he really didn't want to talk about this. "Steve. Are you serious?"

He couldn't stop looking at his plate. "What, I told you I never won a fight before."

"Oh, my god! Why do you even *talk* to him?" Max asked in disgust; her little heart-shaped face was all scrunched up.

"I don't," Steve said flatly.

"*Steve!*" Max cried. She looked all upset and Steve didn't really know why; she hadn't even lived here yet. "How are you so –"

"Okay, wait a second," Billy said. He shifted and sat up some more, twisting around to look at Steve. "Did he *hurt* you?" he asked all intense. He looked like he was about to turn into The Incredible Hulk and launch himself out of the window too; Steve almost laughed even though he still felt like a total dumbass.

"I don't know, not really. It's not a big –"

"Oh, my god, Billy, are you serious?" Max asked him; she actually *was* laughing at him. "You literally knocked Steve unconscious last

year, I don't really think that's much better.”

Bill scowled and turned bright red which was always amazing to see. “Man, shut the *fuck up*.”

“I'm just saying!” She turned to Steve. “Did he ever say sorry?”

Ha. That was another thing Steve didn't want to talk about. “Yeah, no, not really.”

“Yes I fuckin' did,” Bill said all cranky.

“Sure, right before you knocked me into my pool,” Steve said; Billy turned even redder.

“Because you were – ”

Max raised her eyebrows up real high and looked over at Billy. “You should probably say sorry.”

Bill looked even more like the Incredible Hulk. “You're such a *bitch*, Max,” he gritted out; she grinned at him. “I think I've fucking made it up to him, you see Jonathan Byers over here sucking his dick every Tuesday night?”

“Oh, my god, okay,” Steve said in horror. He *really* didn't need that mental image. Also, it wasn't just on Tuesdays. “How about we don't – ”

“You see Jonathan fuckin' Byers over here holdin' his hand and watching *Unsolved Mysteries* with him?”

“Are they doing new episodes over the summer?” Steve asked him.

Billy rolled his eyes and scowled over at him, too. “Shut the hell up, I'm tryin' to make a point.”

“Yeah, it's made, thanks, I forgive you,” Steve said dryly. “Look, I really don't want to talk about this, okay?”

“Fucking asshole,” Billy grumbled, completely ignoring him. “Where's he at?”

“What, are you serious?”

Bill stared at him. “You know where he's at?”

“Okay, what are you gonna do, go to his work?”

“Oh my god, I'll come too!” Max said with way too much excitement. “I want in on this!” She cracked her knuckles all exaggeratedly and almost spilled her plate everywhere.

“Yeah, that's funny,” Steve said.

“I'm serious, man.”

“I am too!”

Jesus. They were both completely crazy – Steve wondered, not for the first time, if they were actually secretly related somehow; they had the same weird violence trait or something. He hunched forward over his plate. “Look, that's really cute or whatever, but, I mean it, I don't want to talk about this, it doesn't, ah, doesn't matter.” The words felt like Jell-O coming out of his mouth which wasn't really possible – he had to try super hard not to stutter. He felt totally stupid; he almost wanted to go home or something.

Billy just looked at him levelly for a long moment. “Okay,” he said finally.

Max put her plate down on the couch cushion beside her and reached for her drink. “Wait, was this the thing about the movie theater?”

“Ah, that was – ”

“Max. He fuckin' said he's done,” Billy said; there was some kind of warning in his tone.

“Okay, okay!” She hopped up and grabbed her plate again, then picked the corded phone up off the floor and balanced it on her hip. “Fine, I'm going to my room, you guys can keep being gross out here.”

“Oh, wow, what, you ain't even gonna eat with me?” Bill asked her

like a huge baby.

Max rolled her eyes and made her goldfish face again. “I have some *calls* to make,” she said ominously, tugging at the phone-line so it would stretch out across the floor. She wandered off down the hallway to her room, still ominously; Steve tried not to feel terrified.

She closed her door up and Bill got up finally and fixed himself a plate too. Steve didn't know what to say now, and this weird silence settled over them as Billy started shoveling his food into his mouth and Steve picked at his spaghetti.

Billy stared at Steve the whole time he was eating. It was really attractive – he kinda looked like a monster or something. Steve didn't mind because he probably looked the same way when he was eating but Max had screamed before that were totally disgusting. After about five minutes he couldn't take it anymore though. “Can you stop frickin' staring at me?”

“I'm not.” Billy slurped the last of his spaghetti like a demodog, still staring, and then started eating off of Steve's plate, too. He looked like Steve was being funny again.

“What?”

“Nothin'.” Bill shoveled more food into his mouth and rolled his eyes. “You kill me, man.”

“I'm not doing anything.”

Billy kept on looking at him like a weirdo. “You're too fuckin' nice to everybody.”

Steve still felt like total shit and he still didn't want to talk about this – Billy didn't know everything. He'd cried and complained to Bill so much about Nancy over the last year but Bill didn't know everything.

He wasn't really nice at all. Tommy and his stupid can of spray-paint, and how Steve'd just gone along with it. How they'd all been laughing, and how Nancy had slapped him, *really hard*, like she hated him. *Nancy the Slut Wheeler*. He'd wanted to hurt her; it felt like he'd spent two years trying to make up for it.

“Yeah, I'm really not.”

“Sure ya are.”

“I'm not.”

“Right.” Billy leaned over and stabbed another meatball off of Steve's plate. “What, you mad at me now?”

“Uh, no. I just don't want to talk about this shit.”

“You're way better than that asshole, man,” Bill told him.

Steve thought that maybe Billy was a little biased; they *did* suck each others' dicks and watch *Unsolved Mysteries* together. “Yeah, I don't know.”

Billy was still eating Steve's food and chewing obnoxiously. He licked his lips and grunted like a monster or a wild animal; Steve was probably going to suck his dick later. “Way hotter too.”

“Right, okay.”

“Not like that's hard.”

“It's okay if you want to be friends with him,” Steve blurted out.

Bill made a face like Steve had just said something horrible about Metallica or made a frickin' joke about his dead mother. “I don't.”

“I just meant like you guys probably like the same stuff. I don't care if you talk to him.”

“Oh, my god, man, he just came over here because his mom fuckin' made him or whatever,” Bill told him. “I don't wanna hang out with him.”

“You can if you want, I don't care if you talk to him,” Steve said again.

“Right.” Billy stared at him.

Steve still felt dumb and he didn't know what to say again. He

watched Billy eat all his food. "So, what'd you guys talk about anyway?"

Billy jabbed violently at Steve's plate again and started shaking his head like a grandfather or something. "Jesus. You kill me, man," he said again around his mouthful of food.

"What?"

"Nothin'." He ate even more of Steve's food. "I didn't say shit to him, I thought you wanted me to be nice to the prick."

Steve stared back at him. "Uh, I do."

He *had* said that before but he didn't actually, like, really mean it or anything. Maybe that was shitty; he should be a better person than that. Steve wished he could say – damn, he didn't know. He was pretty sure that he didn't have to worry about Billy, like, hooking up with *Jonathan* or whatever. He believed it when Bill said that he wasn't into anybody else. But he didn't know how to say that just the thought of the two of them hangin' out together made him feel weird as hell. That wasn't fair and it was, like, super controlling or whatever. "I guess I just – "

"I can't actually beat him up, I'm friends with his fuckin' kid brother."

"Yeah, I know that, I'm friends with him too."

"I'll still jump him if you want. Send Maxine after 'im," Billy told him.

God, he probably really would. "Yeah, that's okay."

"Ain't enough fuckin' people in this town to talk to, what you want me to do?"

"Nothing," Steve said. "Uh, I don't care. You can do whatever you want."

Billy rolled his eyes. "Right," he said again.

"What?"

“Steve. I'm not gonna fucking be friends with some asshole you don't like.”

“I don't c – okay, I don't, like, like hate him or whatever.” It was almost not a lie.

“Wow. Okay,” Billy muttered. He started shaking his head like a grandpa again.

“What?” Steve repeated. He still really didn't want to talk about this but he also wanted to know why Bill was shaking his head at him like a grandpa.

“Jesus. You're too goddamn nice to everybody, how are you even alive, man?” Bill asked him. “You can't even fuckin' say you don't like some guy who stole your goddamn girl.”

“I don't care, it was a long time ago,” Steve said automatically; that was almost not a lie, too. Bill just looked at him. “Okay, he didn't *steal* her, she's not like a, a car or something.”

“Be better if she was.” Billy speared the last meatball off of Steve's plate and crammed it into his mouth. “*Click*. Just threw her in the junkyard.”

“Yeah, I wish.”

Billy started grinning. He had spaghetti sauce on his lower lip – he was so attractive. Steve was really lucky. “Too much mileage, engine seized up.”

He was too stupid, too; he made Steve laugh. “Shut up.”

“What, I kept the title for ya, you can get like sixty bucks for parts.”

“Okay, great.” Billy looked up at him and raised his eyebrows so Steve had to say more stuff. “Look, I don't want to talk about this, what are we even talking about?”

Billy laughed. “I dunno. I'm just sayin' shit, man.”

“Uh, you're also eating all my food,” Steve pointed out.

"Am I?" Bill said innocently. "You ain't eatin' it." He had spaghetti sauce on his shirt now, too.

He still looked really nice even with food all over himself. He was almost making Steve feel okay; Steve didn't know how Billy could make him feel like that without even really doing anything. But he *did* know that he didn't want to be ticked off or feel weird while he was at Bill's place. "You think you're like really cute, huh?"

"I am cute," Bill told him. He took Steve's plate away and shifted closer. "What you gonna do about it?"

"I dunno, I guess let you eat off my pla – " Steve started to say; Billy leaned in and kissed him, a little too forcefully. The plate clinked between them and Steve laughed. "Oh my god, stop. Stop, you're gonna get shit everywhere." Billy laughed like a demon and kissed him some more, grabbing at his shirt-collar, so Steve guessed they were making out now.

He wasn't really opposed to that. Both of their plates ended up on the floor and Bill snaked his way atop of him; he put both of his hands in Steve's hair and kissed him again. "You're too dumb, man," Billy mumbled when their mouths parted for a second. He still kinda tasted like a chocolate bar somehow.

"You're a creep." He put a hand in the back pocket of Billy's jeans.

"Yeah? Be whatever you want." Jesus.

They kissed some more and Bill started mouthing at Steve's jaw and the side of his neck; Steve didn't even care that he hadn't gotten to eat anything. Billy was definitely better at cooking than him, and Max was better than both of them, but Steve guessed he didn't exactly come over here for the food. He curled a hand around the back of Billy's neck and guided their mouths together to kiss him back.

Max burst back out of her room a moment later and wailed loudly and dropped the phone at the sight of them. She was too dramatic; they both still had their shirts on. "Oh my god, really? Don't you have a bed?"

Billy snarled and bit Steve's bottom lip too hard, then pulled away a little. "Man, are you fuckin' serious? It's been like five minutes."

"I was *just* talking to Bev! Well, and Will. Well, and El. We were going to go and see *Dirty Dancing* at the Hawk, but Will says it's already sold out *again!*" Max informed them.

That was a lot of words; Bill put his face down heavily against Steve's neck and groaned. "Jesus, I don't care."

"I'M STILL TALKING!" Max went off on him. "Me and Bev are going skating now, do you guys want to go with us?"

"Yeah, I dunno. Thought you wanted me to read your paper," Bill said all muffled from his spot against Steve's neck.

"What paper?" Steve asked.

"School shit," Bill mumbled into his neck.

"Oh, right." Steve was glad he didn't have to do that stuff anymore.

Max made a really great face and crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know, can you do that with Steve's hand down your pants?"

Heh. Steve reluctantly took his hand out of Billy's back pocket.

"Kinda busy," Bill told her all grouchy.

"You don't want to come with us? It's half-off Mondays and Thursdays!"

He didn't answer for a couple seconds. Finally he pushed himself up onto his elbows; the chain from his pendant hit against Steve's chin. "Maybe next time."

Max's face fell. "Seriously? You don't want to go?" Billy grunted and didn't answer again so she narrowed her eyes. "Oh, what, *El's* not coming so you don't care now?"

Billy snarled like a monster. "I don't care if she goes with you, I'm fucking busy right now."

“But we only went *one time!*” Max exclaimed. She looked like she wanted to stamp her foot like a little toddler.

It was kind of weird – Steve would have thought that Bill would be jumping to go. Billy loved roller-skating and shit: Max had told Steve that they'd used to go all the time back in California. Steve knew that they'd used to go around with Bill's old girlfriend, but it had seemed like something that Max felt was, like, her and Billy's thing or whatever. He and Bill *had* just been making out but they could do that pretty much anytime – they'd just spent almost the whole weekend alone. “What, don't you wanna go skating?” Steve asked him. There was never anything to do on a Monday night in Hawkins.

“Nah, 'm tired.”

He hadn't seemed tired five minutes ago when he'd been pawing at Steve's shirt. “Really? What else are we gonna do?”

“I dunno.” Billy chewed on his lip for a moment, looking down at him. “Thought you didn't like it last time.”

Huh. Steve stared back at him – he didn't know what to say for a moment. It was dumb but he guessed he wasn't really used to people caring about what he liked or wanted to do. It was really cute or whatever. Billy said, “We can just hang out here if you want.”

“Okay, I didn't say I didn't like it, I'm just not good at it,” Steve told him. “We can go if you want.”

Bill narrowed his eyes. “Yeah, you wanna?”

“Sure, yeah, I don't care. I can just, you know, play the arcade games or whatever and fall around, I'm sure there'll be somebody there that I know.”

“See?” Max said.

“Don't want you to be bored.”

“I'll be okay, we can go.”

“Really?” Billy asked him like a little kid.

Steve laughed at him. "Sure, man. I don't care, we can go skating if you guys want."

"Okay. Right, I gotta go change." Bill sat up all excited, elbowing Steve in the collarbone by accident. He almost tripped over their plates on the floor and then knocked the phone over again – he really needed to get a new table or something for out here. "Gimme like ten minutes." He dashed off to his room like a crazy person.

Steve watched him go. After another few seconds he sat up and inspected himself to make sure he didn't have any spaghetti sauce all over himself too; his shirt was almost dry from when Max had spilled the water on him earlier.

Speaking of Max, she wandered over to the record player in the corner of the room and turned the volume down a little, then came over to collapse down beside Steve on the couch. She had a new outfit on now, an olive green shirt and baggy shorts. She leaned over curiously. "Hey, you're okay, right?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm good." Steve thanked God: by some miracle he hadn't gotten a boner for once when Billy had been climbing on him two minutes ago. He tried not to look down at his lap anyway. "Why, what's up?"

"Nothing." She just sat there for second and swiped her hair behind one ear. "I'm sorry I kept asking you stuff about Jonathan," Max told him. "I'm – I shouldn't have done that, I'm sorry. It's not my business."

"Don't worry about it." He felt okay now but he didn't want to get into everything again.

"You just never ... " She trailed off. Now that Steve was good buddies with Eleven and all, he was used to girls takin' forever to say a single sentence; he waited for her to finish. Max hunched her shoulders and took a breath which meant it was probably going to be a big sentence. "Lucas and Dustin always say stuff about Mike's sister, she never really talks to me though. Billy'd never – you're so nice about her, you never even say anything bad about her! You're probably, like, the nicest guy I've ever met. *Aside* from Lucas," she added.

Max didn't know everything about him either. Steve was glad – she was just a kid. She'd probably seen way more shit than him but she was just a kid. “Yeah, well, I was a total douchebag when I was your age, I wouldn't even want you hangin' around me,” Steve told her.

She brushed her bright hair behind her ears again. “If Lucas cheated on me, I'd get Billy and we'd string his intestines up all over Main Street,” she said, dead serious; she made Steve laugh. “I'm not joking!”

“I know, I was picturing it.”

“Why aren't you mad at her?” Max asked him.

“I don't know.” He *had* been mad, for a really long time, and not just at Nance. He'd been so mad that he hadn't even really gone out with any other girls for his whole senior year because he'd been mad at, like, frickin' everybody. That was stupid now; he could have been having a good time.

If Nancy had wanted to go around with some other guy, there must have been a reason for it. The reason had been Steve, or her and Steve, whatever that meant. He didn't know; he'd gave up on trying to figure it out.

It sucked when you realized that you weren't good enough for somebody. Maybe that wasn't really true, but Steve was still trying to get used to ... knowing that it wasn't true or whatever. Nancy wasn't right for him but now he had someone completely different. He had Billy now and it was so much better, even when it was really difficult. “I was mad, it was a long time ago. Now I'm goin' out with your brother.”

“I know that.” Max rolled her eyes in a way that said that she was still recovering from having seen them rolling all over the couch together. “Billy's a total idiot, you can always talk to me if you want. Or Beverly, she thinks you're totally cool!”

Wow. Steve felt really honored or whatever to be one of the girls. “Thanks, you don't have to worry about me.”

"I'm *just* saying."

"All that shit was like three years ago, it doesn't matter. What were you doin' three summers ago?"

She thought about it for a few seconds, little forehead wrinkling up. "I guess – uh, stealing my mom's change and trying to french this guy Bryce in Emily Hadderson's garage," she told Steve all serious.

"Really? Bryce?"

"He had a dirtbike," Max explained. She added quickly, "Uh, don't tell Billy about that part."

Huh. "Yeah, I got you."

She stretched her skinny legs out and scuffed her Keds against the carpet. She was making a new weird face now, pursing her lips together. "So ... Billy said that you talked to your aunt," Max said down to her knees. "Are we really allowed to stay at her house?"

"Oh, ah, yeah." He hadn't seen Max too much over the last week but he'd figured that Bill would tell her about goin' to the lake house out in Michigan. "My aunt's cool, she doesn't care. She said she's gonna go there this week and clean the place up for us." Aunt Mary still thought Steve was, like, all *responsible* or whatever, because Mom hadn't told her about all the shit he'd gotten up to in the last couple years.

"Really?"

"Sure, yeah, we can go," Steve told her. He didn't see what the big deal was – he knew that Max had to have gone on vacation at least once in her life before. "We can go for like a whole week if you want. I mean, if your mom says you're allowed and all, if you can get off of work."

Max didn't answer him right away; she was looking down at her faded red sneakers again. Steve watched her chew on her lip, almost like she was hesitating or something. "You guys really want me to go with you?" she asked finally in a small voice.

He didn't know why but he felt like shit in about two seconds. He'd just been thinking about how Max was just a kid or whatever but she wasn't only that. She was Bill's sister and all but she was, like, Steve's friend, too. She knew all about him, maybe even more than Dustin did. Even before he'd started going out with Billy all the time, Max had always wanted to hang around him. *I never really had any friends before I moved here.* That didn't make sense because she'd just told him about some guy that she'd liked. Real friends or whatever he guessed. She'd got him all that stuff last month when she'd been out at her dad's place in California, and she always kept him updated about what was happenin' on *General Hospital* (not that Steve cared or that he watched it with his mom sometimes). "Of course we want you to go."

"Really?"

"Yeah, are you kidding me?" Steve asked her. She didn't answer so he nudged her shoulder. "Hey, what, I thought we were friends."

Max pushed her shoulder against his so Steve leaned in harder; she started laughing all girly and shoved him away. "Okay, we *are*. I was just asking!"

"It's okay, I know you just really wanna see me in my swim trunks again, you don't have to say it."

"Whatever, shut up!" She shoved him again; she was laughing though. Her hair was falling into her face and she pushed it away with one hand. "I don't know. My mom already said I can go, she ... wants to call your mom though," she told him. She added quickly, "I told her not to say anything about you and Billy, I don't ... know what your mom knows."

Steve didn't know either. He knew that his mom knew *something* was up, because he'd called her at work last week when all the shit had gone down with Max and Bill and Bill's dad. She had to know something because Steve had told her that Billy's dad had freaked out about Steve being over there with them, for being with Billy. He couldn't *not* tell her and he couldn't think of what else to tell her. He'd just really wanted to talk to her.

He guessed that Billy had really scared him – he'd just been sitting on the stairs at Steve's house and he hadn't moved or said anything for almost two hours; it was totally freaky. Steve had thought he must be having, like, a *mental breakdown* or something. He hadn't known what to do so he'd called his mom like a little frickin' kid; he'd wanted to talk her. She'd calmed him down and asked about a million questions and Steve had said *I don't know, what, I don't know*. Mom had wanted to come home right away and Steve had had to beg her not to do that. She'd even asked if Bill had like hit his head or something and Steve had said, *Uh, not more than usual* and Mom hadn't said anything for like a whole minute. Finally she'd said *I think you should just leave him be for a while* which was what Steve had been doing anyway.

Then on Monday night Billy had gone to see his stepmom and on Tuesday Steve had hung out with *his* mom. She'd made him drive her around to like three places before they'd even gotten food.

She'd asked him a bunch more stuff while they'd been driving around, not as much as he'd expected: mostly she wanted to know if Max was okay and if Billy had talked to the police or anything, then she'd wanted to know all about that, as if Steve had a paper transcript or a videotape of Billy talkin' to Hopper at the station. She'd asked a bunch of questions about Mrs. Mayfield, too – what was she gonna do, or if she and Max were gonna go somewhere. “I don't know, do you want me to drive you over there?” Steve had asked all annoyed; he'd almost ran down Tommy Hall walkin' through Main Street on a green light like a goddamn idiot.

“Look, there's your other problem,” Mom had said as if she was tellin' some joke. “Oh my goodness, is he *drunk*?”

Steve had felt super cranky. “Billy's not my problem,” he'd told his mom all dramatic; she'd frowned and said, “That's not what I meant.”

He was thinking of too much stuff and Max was looking at him now. “I don't know what she knows either, I don't care if your mom talks to her.”

Mrs. Mayfield could tell his mom all about it and then Steve wouldn't have to go through the horrible awkwardness of doing it. Then Mom could freak out on him or be disappointed in him or, worse, give him

a bunch of safe-sex articles to read or whatever.

“She won't say anything to her,” Max told him. “My mom's not, like, one of those people who – ”

“YO, MAX! WHERE'S MY SKATES AT?” Billy roared out from his room.

She rolled her eyes. “HOW THE HELL SHOULD I KNOW?” she yelled back, right in Steve's ear. “Oh, sorry.”

They sat and listened to Billy clatter stuff around in his room for a moment. “Hahaha!” Bill muttered to himself like a weirdo; Max rolled her eyes.

“So ... what's your aunt's place like?” she asked. “I've never been out there, isn't it supposed to be like a real beach, like the ocean or something?”

“I don't know, I've never been to the ocean,” Steve reminded her. “You'll like it, there's a boardwalk in the next town over. It's a big house, you can have your own bathroom. They've got like festivals in town and stuff.”

Something crashed loudly in Billy's bedroom again; Max looked over towards the door for a moment before turning back to Steve. “Dustin's gonna be so *pissed*,” she said gleefully.

Oh crap. He really would be – Steve hadn't told Dust yet that he was planning some big vacation with Max and Bill. Dustin got upset when you went to the frickin' Baskin-Robbins without him so Steve was gonna spend all of autumn making it up to him. He kind of really *did* just want to go with Max and with Billy, but maybe Dust could come out for like a day or something. Steve didn't know how that'd work since it was like a five-hour drive though. “Yeah, you won't miss Lucas too much?”

Max rolled her eyes again. She was still smiling though and it made Steve feel good. “I think I'll live.”

Billy came out of his room finally, holding his roller-skates and scowling. He had another shirt on now, too – this black t-shirt on

with some slogan across the front and the sleeves cut off of it. Steve took a moment to wonder how Bill's stupid arms were still so jacked: all he did was lay around on the couch and eat shit and yell at everybody. "Nobody ask if I'm okay, don't frickin' worry about me," he said all cranky.

"What'd you drop?" Max asked him.

"Had to move all my weights." Bill looked around at them. "So we goin' or what?"

Steve made them turn the Crock-Pot off because it was a fire hazard and then Billy locked up the apartment. Out on the street, Max shook Billy's car keys at him and bounded off ahead of them down the sidewalk, swinging her and Bill's skates around. "Shotgun!" she called over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I don't think so," Steve told her; she laughed at him.

It was only past seven-thirty but it felt like twilight already; the sky was flat and dark and the bright sliver of the moon was already visible, high up above them.

Billy was walking slowly beside Steve with his hands in his jeans pockets, head down. After a moment he knocked against Steve's shoulder with his own. "You okay, man?"

Steve felt kind of bad – he knew that he'd probably been acting like a grumpy freak earlier. He was supposed to be the one making sure that *Billy* was okay. "Yeah, no, I'm good. Sorry."

"For what?" Bill said like nothing. "Hey, I'll buy ya some food if you want, I ate all your shit."

"I don't know. I'm kind of expensive," Steve told him.

Billy rolled his eyes and hunched his shoulders a little; he was chewing on his lip and smiling. "Yeah, I fuckin' know that." Steve actually *was* really lucky – his boyfriend was totally cute, and now he was probably going to get curly fries.

Down the street, Max had reached Bill's car already. She leaned into

the driver's seat and laid on the horn. "Can you guys *hurry up?*"

"YO, CHILL THE FUCK OUT AND GET OFF MY CAR!" Bill roared at her; she flipped him off merrily and punched the horn again.

"We have to pick up Bev too!"

"Jesus *fucking* Christ." Billy scowled and walked even slower. "How'd she know we were gonna go?"

Steve laughed. He put his hands on the small of Billy's back and started pushing him down the sidewalk. "Come on, you can show me your new moves."

The week went by slowly – he barely got to hang out with Billy at all so it went by super slowly. Steve didn't mind working or anything, but sometimes there was still a part of him that felt like it was *summer* so he shouldn't be doing shit.

On Tuesday Steve's dad came by the office again and everybody freaked out for half the day – Joanne hid in the bathroom for an hour and Craig got written up for coming in late again. Then on Wednesday they all had to rush around makin' up for shit they hadn't done when Dad had been in the office yesterday. Steve stayed late til past eight with Linda, helping her sort through all their late orders that she was sending to be shipped out tomorrow.

He kinda missed Linda even though he saw her five days a week – he'd used to stay late a lot last fall to help her out but he hadn't really been doing that lately. They filed the paperwork and Linda told him all about this new guy she was goin' around with, then she asked him a bunch of questions about going on vacation next week with Max and Bill and what-all they were gonna do.

Thursday Steve actually got to leave early; Mom was home already

too so he had to try and avoid her and fight off her twenty questions about Billy and then her twenty questions about Max and then her twenty questions about work and school. He knew he couldn't just keep not talkin' to her.

He *could* actually finish his application to Indiana State; that was one thing he could do. He spent the rest of the afternoon filling out his remaining paperwork – last week he'd had to call the high school and get his transcripts printed out again. Billy had written out that whole big paper for him so the least Steve could do was actually send it out.

He'd been out of school for a whole year already and he felt kind of nervous about starting up again, if he'd even get accepted that was. Steve knew that a lot of kids took a year or two off before they started college to figure shit out, but he felt kinda dumb about waiting so long. He still didn't really know what he wanted to do with his life: all he'd figured out over the last year was that he was apparently very into guys. That wasn't exactly a marketable skill, at least he didn't think.

Steve rewrote the essay so that it was in his handwriting and gave himself a headache filling out the rest of the papers, looking over them three times to make sure he hadn't made any dumb mistakes somehow. It felt good to have it all done though. He put everything into the big envelope (it wasn't that wrinkled) and sealed it up so that Mom wouldn't snoop through his shit and try to read over everything.

Out in the kitchen, Mom was talking to the dogs and drinking her wine and eating some take-out that she'd brought home. Steve tried not to say anything about the wine; it was only Thursday and it was like six o'clock.

He gave her the envelope instead. "I dunno if you have time tomorrow, can you send this out for me?"

Mom looked all pleased with him which was okay. She still had her blazer and skirt on from work and she looked all pretty and put-together. Steve was pretty sure it wasn't her first glass of wine but she didn't seem plastered or anything. "I'm shocked, you actually finished it?"

“What, did you think I was gonna not do it?”

She just looked at him for a couple seconds, smile fading, and Steve wondered if he'd had a *tone* or something. “I can never say the right thing to you, can I? I only meant that I was happy for you.”

“Okay, sorry. Billy helped me with it,” Steve told her. That was definitely true.

“Did he?” They were standing across from each other at the big counter in the middle of the kitchen; Mom set her wine glass on the edge of it and looked down at the envelope for a moment. “That was nice of him.”

“I guess.”

She was looking at him again now and not the envelope. “He should think about applying there.”

“Yeah, I don't know.”

“What do you think you'll do next year?” Mom asked him; Steve didn't know what she meant. “You probably want to live on campus, you could stay here and commute. I guess that's not very cool.”

“Uh, I'm not sure yet, I wasn't really thinkin' about that.” He didn't really care about what was cool or not but he was pretty sure it was way less expensive to live off-campus. He wasn't sure if he could make it livin' at home for four more years though – maybe he could still work part-time and get a place. Or maybe in like a year or something Bill would want to –

“Either way, it's not very far. You could still see your friends.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Hey, uh, I wanted to ... can I ask you about something?” Steve asked her. He'd been thinking about this for a couple days now, since Monday really, when he'd talked about it with Max, and he wanted to run it by his mom before he called Aunt Mary up again.

“Of course. Yes. You can talk to me about anything,” Mom told him; she got all serious right away like he was about to confess to a crime

or something.

Okay then. “Ah, right. So you know how me and Bill were gonna take Max out to Haven Harbor next week?” That was the name of the beach town that they were going to – Steve guessed it was still a beach even if it wasn't like the actual ocean or whatever.

“Yes, what about it?”

“I was thinkin', do you think Aunt Mary would mind if I brought like some of the kids out for a weekend? Just like Dustin and Will I guess.” Maybe Lucas, too, but he didn't really feel like hearin' it from his mom right now about letting Max go around with her boyfriend without their parents around.

Mom just stared at him; her eyebrows went up. “You ... ” she said in a funny voice; maybe she was actually drunk after all. She leaned against the counter, propping herself up with her elbows, and rested her chin in one hand, looking up at him. She had this strange look on her face, almost like she was disappointed or something. “That's what you wanted to ask me?”

Great – maybe she thought it was weird or something that Steve wanted to hang out with a bunch of fifteen-year-olds. He wasn't really *dying* to hang out with them; he'd just thought it would be a nice thing to do.

Mom always talked about how much she liked Dustin so she didn't need to look all disappointed. Two years ago Steve wouldn't have even asked about bringing somebody; he would have just done it and then maybe got in trouble later. “What, do you think that's like a bad idea? They won't trash the place or anything.” Well, he was pretty sure.

“No, I just – ”

“I'm not gonna like come all the way back here to get them or anything, plus Mrs. Byers is really ... ” Well. *Crazy* was one word; *overprotective* was probably a better one. “Dustin's mom could probably drive them out, she could like chaperon us or whatever. They'd just stay one or two nights, I don't know if Mary wants a

bunch of people at her place.”

Mom just kept looking at him, for what felt like a long time. She was making him feel majorly dumb. “Okay, can you like say something?” Steve asked her.

“I *was* saying something, you interrupted me. Am I allowed to speak now?”

She was too hilarious; Steve couldn't take it. “Do you think it's weird or somethin'? They don't have to come.”

“No, I don't think it's weird. It's summer, you should be with your friends.”

“Okay,” Steve said, then he didn't know what else to say.

“I'm sure she won't mind, you know she rents the place out to a bunch of people every spring. Honestly I think she should screen her applicants a little better,” Mom told him, gearing up for a tangent . “Did I tell you about what we found in the master bedroom last year when we went – ”

“Oh my god, please,” Steve interrupted her again. She had told him, probably five or six times – it was like her favorite thing. People got really freaky when they were on vacation. Heh. Well, he was about to go on vacation. He was pretty sure he and Bill wouldn't need to bring all that kinda stuff though; they had their own equipment to work with. “Yeah, yes, you told me. Stop telling me, why do you want me to hear about it again?”

Mom laughed at him. “Well, I had to see it. And it wasn't just one, you know. They had about – ”

“Okay, I'm just gonna go back to my room – “

“All right, I stopped, I didn't know that you were so innocent,” Mom told him; she was still laughing at him. “I'll talk to Mary, I'm sure you can bring Dustin and whoever else. You'll have to call her and say thank you.”

“I already did that.”

“Well, you'll have to do it again.”

Jesus H. “Yeah, okay. I will.”

“I already talked to Maxine's mother the other night, I'll get Mrs. Henderson this weekend. I owe her a phone call anyway.”

Mom talking to Mrs. Henderson was kinda scary too; Dustin had the biggest mouth in Hawkins. “Did you ask Mrs. Mayfield a buncha shit or anything?”

Mom curled her mouth up at him and raised her eyebrows again. Steve could tell she was getting a kick out of him even though he'd accidentally swore in front of her. “No, I didn't ask her any *shit*, Steven. You know, I do care about your friends, but her private life is none of my business.”

“Okay,” Steve said.

She was still looking at him kinda funny; she tapped her long nails against the countertop. “Is that ... all you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You can tell me anything you want. You know that, right?”

“Uh, sure.” He didn't know what else she wanted him to say, though. She was still just starin' at him and he was starting to feel pretty weird or stupid again. She had that disappointed look on back on her face now; he didn't know what for. “Yeah, so I was gonna go out soon, so ... ”

“Oh. Okay. Of course.” She straightened up and stood so that she wasn't leanin' against the counter anymore and picked up Steve's big college envelope. “I suppose I should actually do some work, I'll send this out tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks for finishing it,” Mom told him. “Will you be home later?”

“Uh, I'm not sure.”

“Are you going to be at Billy's?”

“Yeah.” Just two guys, hanging out at an apartment and doing guy stuff.

“Okay.” She looked at him some more. “Well, I'll leave you be.” She filled up her wine glass again and wandered off into her office.

Steve made himself some dinner and tried not to feel all weird. He should feel lucky that she hadn't asked him a bunch of stuff about Bill again.

He took Luke and Leia outside and ate by the pool, tossing their ball to them so they wouldn't feel neglected when he went out for another night. Bill was eatin' dinner at his boss's house with Max but he'd told Steve that he'd probably be back by eight and to come over if he wanted; obviously Steve wanted to come over.

It was a little past eight-thirty when he got there – luckily this time he didn't have to see Jonathan Byers mooching around or anything. When he got up into the apartment Max was over again; she and Bill were sitting around on the couch with a bunch of records at their feet and the cat pacing between them. They looked like they were having some big conversation – they stopped talking and looked up when Steve came in. “Okay, don't get up or anything.” He closed the door behind himself. “What're you guys doing?”

“Nothing,” they both said right away; Max jumped up from her spot on the couch and Steve felt suspicious.

“I'm not staying over, don't worry,” she told him. She dumped Chewy into Billy's lap and smiled at him making a face. Her hair was pulled back from her face with a big clip and she had a cute dress on with weird sleeves; Steve guessed she'd gotten all dolled up to go over to Bill's boss's house or something. “I'm gonna sleep over at Bev's, I just wanted to take some records.”

Steve didn't mind if she stayed or not. He sat down on the couch next to Bill and tapped at one of Chewy's ears. “Uh, okay.”

Bill turned to look at him, jostling the cat in his arms. His eyebrows went down and made his forehead get all scrunchy. “What the hell are you wearin’?”

“What?” Steve said. He looked down at himself. He'd changed into shorts at home but he still had his shirt from work on; it was a Thursday shirt so it was a kinda fun shirt. He couldn't remember when he'd bought it, maybe back in the winter when it'd still been cold out. It was a dark blue collared shirt and it had little sailboats on it. “You don't like it? You should have seen my tie earlier, it completes the look.” Billy made his forehead even scrunchier and Steve decided to stop torturing him. “How was it at your boss's house?” he asked instead.

Bill rolled his eyes and made his face look normal again. Chewy mewed and made to jump away, so Billy gathered her up in his arms and tucked her head under his chin. Holy God, it was too cute. “Tell 'im what you did,” he said to Max all cranky.

“I didn't do anything!”

Steve tried not to stare at his cute boyfriend and his cute cat. “Why, what happened?”

“Nothing!” Max said happily.

“Brought her fuckin' mom over there like it was some blind date.”

“I *just* thought it would be nice!”

“Yeah, was real nice, she made that fuckin' spaghetti thing again,” Bill told him; Steve laughed. “It's not funny, it was even worse than last time.”

“Hank ate like half of it even though we told him that you got sick from it.”

Jesus H, Max was so rude sometimes – now Mrs. Mayfield was gonna think Steve didn't like her cooking. “Okay, I didn't get sick from the stupid – ”

“Mom and Hank talked for like forever, we *just* got back here,” Max

informed him.

That was so interesting, as Bill would say. "How's your mom doin', anyway?" Steve asked her.

Max shrugged. "I don't know, she's good. She's better."

"Did she hear from – " Steve didn't know what to call Bill's dad; *that asshole* sounded good in his head. He directed the question at Billy. "Did she talk to your dad or anything?"

Billy rolled his eyes again; he was scratching Chewy between her ears. "What do you think?"

"I don't know, that's why I'm asking," Steve said patiently.

"Called her like two times or whatever, he's tryin' to work her over again."

Jesus Christ. "Are you serious? What, he wants to move back in?"

"No."

Bill was so informative. "Okay, so?"

Nobody answered him; Max and Bill gave each other another one of their weird looks. Steve wondered what was up. "What?"

"Well, *apparently* Mom told him she wants a divorce," Max told him.

"Okay, so that's good, right?" Steve asked. Max didn't answer again. "What?"

"Nothing, I mean – yeah, it's good!" she said. She picked another record up off the floor and stood back to add it to her pile on the counter behind her. "He's like begging her not to take him to court, I think Hopper really scared him. He said if she doesn't press charges, he'll let her have the house!"

"What, are you serious?" Steve said. "I mean, she's not going to do that, right?"

"I .. I don't know yet. She said – "

"I told her she should do it," Bill interrupted her.

"What?" Steve stared at him, then at both of them (and Chewy too).
"Are you serious, why would you tell her that?"

"Because she – "

"I thought you wanted him to get locked up."

"Jesus." Billy rolled his eyes again. "I knew you'd do this shit," he muttered.

Really Steve felt insulted. "I'm not doing anything, why would you tell her that?"

"They need someplace to fuckin' live."

"Yeah, but I – " Steve didn't really know what to say. He didn't understand, like at *all*. "Bill, he tried to beat the shit out of you."

Billy shrugged. He slouched back on the couch and sat slumped with the cat against his stomach. He looked massively uncomfortable which wasn't what Steve had meant to do. "Ain't nothin' new, I still got the restraining order out on him."

"Okay, but how are you just – "

Max jumped in to shut him up. "Mom really doesn't want to go to court, everybody in this town knows everything in like five minutes. She doesn't want us to, like, have to go and – "

"Said I'd fuckin' talk if she wanted," Bill said all cranky.

"Yeah, because you really want to do that!" Max snapped at him; Billy grunted. She told Steve, "Neil *really* doesn't want to go to jail, he said – "

"Yeah, who would," Steve grumbled.

"Can I TALK?"

"You're makin' the cat nervous," Bill told her; she glared at him.

Jesus, she was scary. Steve didn't know how Bill's dad had ever laid a hand on her. "Okay, okay. Go ahead."

"He'd like lose his job and everything, he told her he'd give us the house and go away!"

Steve was pretty sure people like that never went away. "Yeah, but do you think he'll really do that?"

Max shrugged. She looked a little less scary now. "She can still press charges if he doesn't. Hop took pictures and stuff, my mom talked to him for like three hours."

"Okay, but he's gonna – "

"Look, it don't matter if it's what she fuckin' wants to do," Bill interrupted him. "Probably be better that way."

Steve stared at him. "How the hell is that better?"

"Um, because we then would have *our house*," Max told him like he was dumb.

"Yeah, but ... " He didn't know what to say again; it didn't seem fair. "You guys shouldn't have to worry about that."

Max just shrugged a second time; it made her weird puffy dress-sleeves fall down her shoulders. She had a little frown on her face. "Everything's in Billy's dad's name. My mom pays a lot of our bills, but she said it's all in his accounts. Even the stupid water bill!" Billy laughed and Max rolled her eyes over at him and smiled for a second; Steve didn't know what was funny. "She said Hopper was telling her about, like ... " She twisted her mouth up and looked over at Billy again. "What did she say?"

"Squatter's rights or some shit."

"Oh, right. But I ... don't really know what that is. And she'd have to go to court for that, too."

Steve didn't know what that was, either. "That's ... yeah, sorry, that's totally fucked up."

"I know."

"He won't just let you guys stay there?" Steve asked her; Max gave him a look.

"What do *you* think?"

"Okay." He rubbed his face. "That's totally fucked up," he said again.

"I guess," Bill said.

"But what are you gonna – "

"Don't know," Bill interrupted him. He still looked weird and small and all hunched over. He was totally crushing the cat; Steve guessed she was used to it with a million kids over here all the time. Bill shifted over again, further away from Steve, and glanced up at Max. "Hey, gonna miss your movie."

"Oh, right!" She bounced a little like she'd been startled, then went over into the kitchen to grab her ripped-up backpack from the floor. "Okay." She picked up the records she'd had stacked up on the counter. "Fun Fair tomorrow, right?" she asked them both.

"Sure," Bill said.

"Okay." Max brushed her hair back – it was getting in her face even with her fancy clip – and slung her pack over one shoulder. "See you later."

"You want a ride?"

"No, I'm good!" Max told him. "We're gonna meet up with El and go to the five-and-dime before it closes, sometimes they let you get stuff for real cheap. Beverly said she has to get the shortest skirt possible to go on the swings tomorrow."

Bev was really something else; Steve watched Billy rub his face. "Okay, don't tell me about it."

Max laughed. "Later," she said again.

"Bye."

Max went off to get her sales in and Billy put the TV on for him. It felt weird again and Billy felt really far away even though they were still sitting next to each other; Steve didn't know if he was mad or something. "You eat already?" Bill asked him.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Did you actually eat that pie thing?" Billy made a horrible face which probably meant yes. "Hey, are you okay?" He knew that Bill had told him not to ask that but how was he supposed to not ask that.

"I guess."

"How are you like fine with that?"

"What?" Billy looked over at him. Steve noticed for the first time that he was wearin' one of his fancy button-up shirts, like he'd gotten all dressed up to eat at his boss's house too (there were no sailboats on it, though he was covered in cat hair now). That was kind of cute or whatever – Billy always talked about Hank a lot, probably even more than Steve went off about Linda or Joanne. It seemed like he looked up to him or something, even though he'd probably never say it. Steve had known Hank for about all of his life even though he'd never really talked to him; Mom always said that he was *good people* and Dad said that it was a shame about his family, whatever that meant. "Oh, 'bout my dad?" Bill rearranged Chewy on his lap so she was sitting up with her back paws sticking out like a teddy bear. "I don't care."

"Right," Steve said doubtfully.

"Jesus, I knew you'd act like this, I wasn't gonna say shit about it."

Okay, that kind of hurt, really. "I'm not doing anything," Steve said. He guessed he came off as a real judgy person or something. He wasn't judging Billy or Max *or* their mom; it just didn't feel fair. "I was asking you how you felt about everything, I want you to be happy."

"I don't feel anything, I want my – " Billy made a face and patted at the cat too hard; her tail twitched dangerously. "I want Max's mom to do whatever she wants, I told her I'd fucking help her. You think I wanna sit in some court and tell everybody 'bout how I let my dad beat on me for my whole life?"

"That's not your – "

"You think I wanna tell everybody about how I watched him be a fuckin' creep about my sister for two, three years and I didn't do shit?"

Steve didn't say anything; it felt like he was falling down or something. He still remembered Bill's dad last week, so clear like it was still happening: he'd yanked Max right across the room like he'd done it a thousand times. Probably he *had* done it a thousand times, to Billy at least. *I don't think you know what hurt is.* Steve didn't know what he'd thought – he'd seen Bill all beat up so many times, but he'd just never really thought that it'd gotten that bad. Like actually, really thought, he guessed. "That's not your fault."

"Yeah, sure it ain't," Billy said. "Look, it's for shit, about what I expected. Prolly like the best thing."

"Right, how is that the best thing?" Steve asked him.

"I dunno." Billy actually looked at him; his eyes were so blue. "Okay, she takes him to court, best case scenario. He goes to jail for, like, what, eighteen months?"

"Better than nothing, that's eighteen months you don't have to worry about him."

Bill gave him this real flat look. "Really?"

"What?"

"Steve. He beat the fuck outta me my whole life, he broke my *fucking* arm last year," Billy told him. He stopped for a moment, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. "I knocked my girl up and he almost killed me, he had – fuckin' – fun with it, I'm never not gonna worry about him. The second he moved in Max and her moms he started

workin' on 'em. You don't know everything.”

Billy had never really said so much stuff to him, Steve didn't think, aside from last week in his room, maybe. Steve could talk on for five hours about his whole life but everything Bill told him was like a puzzle-piece or something that Steve had to gather up and put together; sometimes it was too much. Steve didn't want it to be too much; he wanted to know everything Bill wanted to tell him. “I would if you'd tell me.”

“Doesn't matter,” Bill said dismissively. He sounded like how Steve had sounded on Monday night, except it wasn't about stupid high school shit. “I just meant like if he wants to give her the house and fuck off, that'd be the best thing.”

“Right, okay, how do you know he's not going to show up a week later after he fed your stepmom some bullshit line?”

“I don't.” Billy shrugged again. He let Chewy go and he and Steve watched her pad across Bill's lap and stand uncertainly on the couch cushion, assessing the mess of records on the floor. “You think if he goes to jail for a year he can't come back and do the same shit?”

Okay, well. “I don't know,” Steve said; he *didn't* know. He didn't know what else to say or what he was supposed to say. “How the hell can they only put him away for like a year?”

“First offense, it ain't a felony. Chief said he might only get probation, have to pay money or somethin',” Billy muttered. Steve made a face; he couldn't help it. It was such crap. “Yeah, I know. It's total shit. Least if he makes this deal with Max's mom and signs the house over to her, they got that. He can fuck off back to California and forgot about us.”

That still didn't seem fair; it really didn't seem fair. “But what about you?”

Billy chewed on his lower lip and pushed his jaw out. “What about me?” he asked like it was some challenge.

“Don't you want him to go to jail?”

"I want him to leave Max and her moms alone," Bill told him. He reached out and started petting Chewy again; she climbed back up on his lap, pushing her head against his arm. "I could give a shit, I don't even wanna be talking about this. I got you and I got my job, what else do I need?"

"I don't ... uh, nothing, I guess." He deserved so much more than that – Steve didn't want to say it and make a big thing out of it, though. They were already talking about way too much stuff which was Billy's least-favorite thing. "Sorry, I just wanna know what's going on. I want whatever you want."

"I know." He still looked unhappy, though. "I dunno what Sue's gonna do, I'll tell ya when she figures it out."

Steve guessed they were done talking about it. That was okay because he was pretty ready to be done. It was probably crappy but it was, like, a lot – there wasn't really anything that he could do about it. "Okay, so what do you wanna do tonight?"

"I don't care. Rented you a movie." Bill had got them the new *Aliens* movie that had just come out last year; it'd been all sold out at the video store a couple weeks ago when Steve had gone there.

He got the movie set up and then settled back on the couch to put an arm about Billy. It still felt weird, maybe just because Bill was still holding the cat though.

Steve really liked watching movies with Billy; he didn't yell at Steve too much for asking too many questions like Dust or stupid Mike did, and he didn't get annoyed when Steve didn't know what the hell was going on. Steve hadn't really been paying attention to the first *Alien* movie last week so he had a lot of questions. Private Hudson was pretty cute; somehow he managed to keep that thought to himself.

He looked over at Bill. "Why are you doing that?" he asked; Billy was holding Chewy cradled in his arms like she was a babydoll.

"What?" Billy glared at him. "She fucking likes it."

"Yeah, I think she's unconscious."

“Man, whatever.” Bill leaned over to set the cat down onto the carpet, pretty carefully for him really, and they watched as she fluffed her tail out and then sprinted off into Max's room. “You're such a prick to me, now my arm's cold.”

“Okay, well. I'm right here,” Steve pointed out seductively, at least he hoped.

“Yeah, I'm not getting near you with that fuckin' shirt on.”

God, Bill was such a jerk. He was covered in cat hair anyway right now too so he couldn't say shit. “What's wrong with it, it's my work shirt,” Steve told him.

“You look like a fucking sea captain or some shit.”

“Uh, if I was a captain, I'd probably have, like, a little hat or something too.” Billy looked totally disgusted by him; he was too fun. “Ahoy,” Steve said like a nerd. His family did have a boat, after all. Billy stared at him with wide eyes and then started laughing. “Uh, actually, you know what, yeah, that was too much.”

“You're retarded, man.”

“I retract that, I retract the *ahoy*, we can just act like I didn't, uh, say *ahoy* and that would be – ”

“Stop fuckin' saying it,” Billy begged him; he was still laughing though.

“Okay, I stopped, I'm sorry,” Steve said, even though he was kind of doing it on purpose. He'd say a million stupid things if it made Billy feel good.

Bill was still smiling so Steve leaned in and kissed him finally; he'd been waiting all day. Billy kissed him back and put a hand on Steve's arm. “Are you done?”

“Yeah, probably not,” Steve told him. “God, I wish there was some way to shut me up, I just – ” Billy kissed him again – “can't stop talking, I don't know what – ”

"Yeah, that doesn't even work." Billy put his hand on the side of Steve's face which felt nice too – he didn't feel super far away anymore. They were good at one thing, at least. He kissed Steve's mouth slowly and moved his hand to the back of Steve's neck to tangle it in his hair. They made out for like a minute and then Bill shoved Steve back said they had to actually watch the movie; he was real serious about *Alien* or whatever.

Steve already didn't know what was going on. "Wait, why's Ripley alive?"

"What?" Bill looked over at him.

"I thought she died in the last one, the ship blew up."

Billy scoffed. "Jesus. I frickin' knew you fell asleep."

"Okay, I wasn't asleep," Steve told him. His eyes had just been tired. Also Billy's shoulder was really comfortable.

"She got out on the, like, the escape-pod thing."

"Oh right." Now he kinda remembered. "No, but then the monster thing was in there with her too."

"Yeah, she booted 'im out."

"Okay," Steve said doubtfully. He didn't exactly remember that part but he had *not* been asleep. "But do you think that would really work –"

"Steve."

"Okay, okay." Steve turned back to the screen and they watched the movie for a while, until about halfway he guessed. It was kind of confusing – there were a lot of new characters, and Steve couldn't remember anybody's name (aside from Hudson), and he had to keep askin' who was who. He asked so many questions that Bill finally broke and said (as nicely as possible for Bill, Steve thought) that Steve really needed to shut the fuck up. His solution for shutting Steve the fuck up was to shove him down on the couch and start making out with him, though, so Steve was pretty okay with that.

After a moment Billy pulled back and just looked at him. His eyes flicked up and down Steve's face, as if he was searching for something – Steve wondered if Bill was about to tease him about his shirt again. “Hey, thanks for makin' me feel okay.”

“I'm not really doing anything.” He really wasn't, aside from maybe being too annoying.

“Okay.” They shifted around on the couch; Steve got cat hair up his nose and almost sneezed which was really sexy. He ended up just takin' Bill's shirt off since it was so inconvenient. He guessed he didn't need to know what was gonna happen to Private Hudson.

They didn't really hook up or have sex or do anything dirty which was kind of unusual for them (not that Steve thought that anything he and Bill did together was dirty). They made out on the couch for the rest of the movie and then went to bed and made out some more, then Bill snaked his arms around Steve's waist like a boa constrictor and fell asleep in two seconds. Sleeping was Steve's fourth-favorite activity (it ranked after eating, sex with Billy, and talking) so he closed his eyes too.

His watch went off way too early and woke them up before dawn – he'd been playing around with it at work and had forgotten to set it back to normal. He tapped at it a couple times until it stopped beeping and slung his arm back around Billy. Even though he was still tired he didn't really fall back asleep again, just laid there for a long time, running his hand down Billy's back and enjoying the feeling of layin' around with somebody. Chewy was laying on the radiator across the room by the window, flicking her tail and judging them.

His watch went off again at a quarter-to seven which meant that he really had to get up soon. Steve turned it off again and rubbed at his face. “Okay,” he said finally. “Yeah, I gotta go soon.”

“Mm.” Bill was still half-laying on him and he felt really good; Steve never wanted to move. “Don't get up, just stay here.” He wrapped his arms up around Steve's waist and tightened his grip a little. “Make it

worth your while.”

God, Steve was gonna get hard. “Yeah, I bet.”

Billy pressed his face into Steve's chest and then kissed his collarbone, mouth heavy with sleep. “Call outta work, we'll have fun,” he mumbled. He sounded really sleepy. “Can lay in the bed all day.”

He made Steve laugh. “Are you serious?”

“Sure.” He kissed Steve's neck some more; his face was scratchy. “Just stay here,” he said again. He stretched up and kissed Steve on the mouth, two times, then burrowed his head back against the pillow.

Steve knew it was just morning-talk or whatever but he actually thought about it; it sounded really nice. Nobody had ever, like, asked him to stay before. It felt way different than when he'd been younger – of course it did; he'd never really stayed at somebody's place before. He *really* didn't want to leave. “Yeah, I can't really do that,” he said finally.

“Sure ya can.”

“Okay, what about you?”

“Mm,” Bill said into his neck again. “What, I'll call out too.”

“No you won't.”

“Mm,” Billy grunted; he totally wouldn't. He tightened his grip around Steve's waist again though.

They laid there for a few minutes more, just touching each other kind of lazily, and then the light shining into Bill's window told Steve that he *really* needed to get up. “Okay, I'm serious, I have to go, sorry. I gotta get up.”

“Mm,” Bill said again. “Don't wanna.”

Steve sat up and disentangled himself from the arms that were

trappin' him against the pillow; he sensed that his hair was stickin' straight up. "You can still sleep more, *I* have to go," he told Billy.

"But I want you to *stay here*," Bill said back to him in the same patient voice. Okay, Steve probably sounded majorly annoying.

Steve hesitated again; he was wondering if he could get away with it. He still had time to take off, even with putting in for vacation next week. The office was small though and he hated leaving people hanging, especially if it was Linda. Also, Bill *totally* wouldn't actually call out either, and then Steve would be ticked off all day. "I – yeah, I, I can't."

"Mm. I know." Billy rolled his eyes.

"I'm sorry. Were you really gonna call out?"

Billy scrunched up his face for a second, then stretched out and wrapped his arms around one of the pillows. "Half day?" he tried.

Thought so. Steve stood up and tried to find his pants on the floor. "I'll do whatever you want this weekend, okay? And we got the carnival tonight," he reminded Billy as he did up his belt. It was finally Friday – he had to run back home and get his best most fun shirt for work.

"I guess," Bill mumbled into the pillow like a grump.

Steve still felt bad, like he was being disappointing or something. It wasn't exactly a new feeling, he guessed. He sat down on the bed and leaned over to comb Billy's hair away from his face, then ran a hand down his back. The mattress was *really* comfy and Steve immediately didn't want to leave again. Stupid Billy and his stupid bed and his stupid back muscles. "I'm sorry."

"Mmph," Bill said into his pillow. "Forgive ya if you make me coffee before you go."

He made Steve laugh. "Yeah, I can do that." He was still touching Billy's back and thinking about calling out. "You gonna meet me tonight?"

“Yeah. Max said seven.”

“Do you know where to go?”

Bill picked his head up and squinted at Steve like Steve was a goddamn moron. “Yeah, I know how to get to the frickin’ town square.”

“Okay, okay.” God, he was so cranky; Steve didn’t want to leave again. “Okay, I really gotta go, I’m gonna be late.”

“Yeah, okay.” Billy curled a hand around Steve’s wrist for a second and closed his eyes again. “Later.”

“Later. I – yeah, see ya.” Steve leaned in and kissed him real quick, then felt kind of weird as he straightened up to push himself off of the bed. He went down the little hallway and then into the kitchen, feeling weird. He felt like he should have said *I love you* or something and he probably shouldn’t say that. It had almost just burst out automatically, like when you, well, were leaving for work and you hugged somebody and said *Bye, I love you*, like in a show on the TV or something.

It should be a way bigger deal than that. Steve didn’t know how to just say it; he hadn’t really said it to Billy before in, like, a good or romantic way, and he didn’t know how to do it now. Last week they’d been in a bed too and Steve had blurted it out: he’d just felt so awful and Bill had been *crying* and his face had been all fucked up and shit was just bad. Steve had wanted him to feel better so he’d just said it – it wasn’t like he didn’t mean it or anything, but looking back on it, it probably hadn’t been his finest moment.

He’d thought about it like all week though and he was pretty sure he had meant it; it hadn’t been the first time he’d wanted to say it. But Billy had got all upset and said *Man, don’t do this shit now* so Steve didn’t know when the hell he was supposed to do it. He could jump back into the room and say *I love you* right now and Bill would probably scream his head off at him for sayin’ it when they both had morning breath or something. He had to know anyway.

Okay. That was way too many thoughts and it was barely past seven.

Anyway, it was still Friday, so Steve was still feeling all right. He set Bill's coffee machine up, let Chewy out, and headed down to his car.

Notes for the Chapter:

– Still alive here! Thanks to everyone who's read up to this point and to everyone who's left me nice comments recently! Also a special thank you to my kind, smart, and (most importantly) BEAUTIFUL friend who was so quick to look over this so that I could post it right before season three airs!

– I think this is probably the longest time I've gone without updating since I started writing this – sorry for that! Sorry that I took two months to update and didn't even give you guys a sex scene.

– I know this took me forever to update but I only have three (uhh, maybe) more chapters to go and I really want to finish this, even though I'm sure season three will give us a bunch of new content and new ideas. I have four other Harringrove stories that I need to start working on, so I'm not sure what I'll be writing / when I'll be posting what. You can probably also expect a bunch of fluffy oneshots for this 'verse; I didn't write 800,000 words about Billy becoming a good person to not write fluffy oneshots!!!

– My friend pointed out that Billy wouldn't know about everything that happened in season one and we were discussing what his reaction would be. She came up with Billy's dramatic 'He *hurt* you?' line, also holding hands and watching *Unsolved Mysteries*. We think we are too funny. Sorry for Jancy bashing ... I *guess*. It's just facts, people.

18. Chapter Eighteen (part one)

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper and Mrs. Byers were still flirting and talking at each other; it was so terrible. Steve guessed he understood why the kids all got so giggly and stupid whenever he and Bill touched each other – it was like a bad movie or something that you couldn't look away from.

“Uh, yeah, Hop, you've got – just a little – ” Mrs. Byers gestured and made a silly face. She reached out and wiped some of the mustard off of his beard with two fingers. Everyone else froze in horror; Billy of course looked totally thrilled like he was watching a comedy act.

Notes for the Chapter:

Uh, hi! I guess I'm back!

I'm not sure if there's anyone out there still reading this silly long story, but I always knew I wanted to come back and post at least one or two more chapters. The last year has been very hectic and terrible (for many of us, I'm sure), but I'm finally in a place where I have a bit more time and motivation to start writing again.

As usual, brevity is a thing I struggle with; this got way too long. It got so long that AO3 could not format it and I had to split it up into two parts. I really didn't want to do that; it is meant to be read as one chapter, despite how long it got. Nothing much happens in either of these parts aside from Steve and Billy finally have actual sex. They have so much sex, in fact, that it's probably extremely unrealistic, but fuck it, it's fanfic!

Over the last three years that I've been writing this story, I've encountered so many kind and wonderful people — I'd truly be bereft without my fandom friends. Without writing a huge list, I'd like to say thank you so much to the people who have looked over these new chapters and encouraged me that they didn't suck, as well as the friends who have cheered me on and kept me sane during Covid times (Emily, it's always princess hours somewhere! 💕). If you're reading now, thank you as always for taking the time to do so, and if by some chance you've left me a comment and I haven't managed to respond yet, please know that it was seen and appreciated.

As always, enjoy! 💕📖

Chapter Eighteen (part one)

Steve went to work.

Fridays were usually the best days at his job, but this one seemed to take about forever, even though Steve had worn his most fun tie. Just taking lunch felt like about four hours. One of the older guys in the office bought everybody pizza, and Steve got to hear Joanne's gossip about the new guy she'd been seeing, a friend of a friend that she'd gone to college with.

It seemed like everybody was seeing someone lately: Linda had this new boyfriend from the bank she'd been going around with too, and even Craig had found some girl that was dumb enough to go out on a second date with him — Steve guessed he'd finally given up on Joanne. That was nice and all (well, probably not for Craig's girl), but it made Steve feel kind of bad that he couldn't really join in on the conversation and, like, say anything about himself and Billy or anything. He didn't like talking about Bill like he was a girl or something. It felt too much like lying, even though Steve wasn't going to just up and announce to the whole office that he was dating a dude. He wasn't that dumb.

Anyway, it was summer, and it was Friday, and it was carnival night, too. Steve wanted to leave early – after lunch he tried to focus on his papers and not think too much about this morning or how weird it had been. Tried not to think about Billy, or about telling Billy that he loved him. Well – more like not telling him, really. The not-thinking thing didn't exactly work, even though Steve still finished filling out all his orders by three.

It wasn't a big deal; he could just say it. Except that it ... kind of felt like a big deal, because Bill had said it before a bunch of times, and Steve had really never said it back or anything. Aside from last week in his room when he'd blurted it out and had screwed everything up and had made Billy, like, cry even more. He didn't want to do that again.

Steve was pretty sure there was something, like, actually wrong with him – he'd never worried about stuff like this before. When you loved somebody, you wanted to make them feel good: it should be easy to tell them that you loved them, not make you feel queasy and terrified and make your forehead sweat really bad at work.

It *wasn't* easy. It wasn't like Steve had ever done this relationship thing with a guy before; it felt different. It *was* different – maybe not just because it was a guy, but because it was *Billy*, and Steve never knew what to do when he was around Bill, especially lately. If he told Billy *I love you* again at the wrong moment, he'd probably get punched in the stomach.

There was also this tiny, super fucked-up part of him that wasn't sure if he should say it again – this mean little malignancy somewhere inside of him that didn't *want* to say it back, not yet at least. It was just that he and Billy had been messing around for months, and for the longest time Bill couldn't even tell Steve that he *liked* him or that he even cared at all. It had felt like he was always chasing after Billy or something, desperately trying to get some sort of affirmation.

Obviously everything was different now, but Steve guessed he still thought about it, how it had been when they'd first started hooking up. Now Billy was the one waiting for something. Steve guessed that there was this part of him that kind of enjoyed having the power for once.

It was just a small part, though. It was fucked up; Steve knew that.

He could have said it like nine or ten times just this week: he could have said it last Thursday when he and Billy had been watching *Alien* together. He thought about everything too much and got too, like, weird or nervous or something and totally froze up. That was stupid because Steve had definitely never thought of himself as an anxious person before.

What if he said it and Bill made fun of him or something. Well, Steve didn't really think that Billy would actually make fun of him, but he might get all annoyed or say *can you not fucking do that right now* again. That wasn't fun or easy. What if Steve said it and realized later that he actually didn't mean it somehow. If he still wasn't sure, he shouldn't say it, right? Or what if he waited too long to say it and Bill got fed up and decided he wanted, like, a more *emotionally available* boyfriend or something. Then again it wasn't as if *Billy* was super *emotionally available* either.

Maybe he was – he'd even told his step-mom about them, and Steve was still too chickenshit to do that. Billy wouldn't change his mind after all that stuff, Steve didn't think: it was a big deal. Maybe Steve should start off small and, like, test the waters or whatever, try out some crap like *I love your eyes* or *I love being with you*. Yeah. That sounded good.

Well, maybe not. He should probably say something, you know, way less corny and cliché. Steve didn't know what to say or know what Billy would want to hear. Something more personal, probably. What was he supposed to say. *I love talking about hockey with you* or *I love the way you let me complain about work for an hour*; that was true. Or maybe, *Hey, I love the way you eat with your mouth open and make fun of me and annoy me all night*; that was true. *I love that birthmark on your shoulder, you know, the one that's shaped like New Mexico*; that was true too. Jesus. He was too romantic – not really. God, maybe he shouldn't frickin' say anything at all.

Steve bet that Kevin Costner from *A-5* was, like, extremely emotionally available and romantic. With his two stupid wimpy collies. Ugh. It was too annoying.

He finished all his paperwork, fixed the copy machine for Linda, and made it home at just past five. He parked out on the street and got the mail, then walked slowly up the driveway, shuffling through the stack of envelopes: two bills and a bunch of junk mail.

Steve wondered if his mom had already sent his application to Indiana State out like he'd asked her to. Damn, he probably should have just done it himself and not gotten her involved. He almost got all nervous or something, just from looking at the mailbox. Now he was gonna have to suffer for like three months waiting to hear back and Mom was gonna torture him the whole time asking him a bunch of shit. Then he was either gonna get rejected again, or he was gonna have to go.

It wasn't like he wasn't excited to go off to college or anything. He'd been wanting to go; he'd been waiting. He'd never really thought that he wouldn't get into *any* of the schools he wanted and that he'd be stuck around town for a whole 'nother year and some change. It was just that he hadn't been in classes for a while now: it would be this whole big transition and all, and Steve really wasn't sure that he was smart enough to actually do it.

Plus then he'd be away from Billy – not that far away, but still – and they wouldn't be seeing each other like every other day anymore. Maybe that would be bad for them; Steve didn't know. Billy was still super important even if Steve couldn't say *I love you* yet. He knew that he couldn't, like, not go to school because of his thing with Bill, but the thought of moving away made him kinda nervous.

He knew that kids their age broke up over distance and stuff a lot. If Steve was away at school and Billy was working it might be hard. It wasn't like he and Bill were the type of people who liked to talk on the phone for an hour every night or write love notes. He didn't think that he would get bored but Billy might get bored or decide he wanted to be with somebody who could be around more. The state college was only an hour away – well, forty minutes the way that Billy drove – but it made Steve feel uneasy. There was just a lot of new stuff happening this year, happening soon.

Luke and Leia started barking their heads off from inside when they heard him open up the front door and they met him in the kitchen.

They both bounced and skittered all over him like they usually did when he hadn't been home for a night or two; they did that a lot lately since he'd stayed over at Bill's place so much this summer.

Steve wondered what was gonna happen with the dogs if he really went away to college in a couple months – that made him feel kinda bad, too. He knew that his mom would feed them and take care of them and all, but she wasn't around that much either and she'd never exactly been an animal-lover. She wasn't gonna talk to 'em like a geek or throw Leia's Frisbee for her or spend fifteen minutes trying to cut Luke's nails while he whined and cried and scratched up the kitchen floor. They'd be even lonelier once (*if* , really) Steve left.

Maybe Max and Bill could still come over and see them sometimes. That would be good for Steve's mom because she could entertain and tell everybody a bunch more embarrassing childhood stories about Steve. Or Eleven liked animals; maybe she could come and hang out with the dogs or walk them sometimes. That should be safe for her to do, Steve figured. Luke and Leia were okay on the leash and they were pretty tough. Plus El had, like, mind powers and all in case somebody hassled her. “Are you super tough?” Steve asked Luke (*not* in a baby voice, not that there was anyone around to hear it anyway); Luke drooled happily on Steve's shoe. “Oh, yeah, thank you.”

Okay. Now it was quarter to six and Steve had spent way too much time being thinking and bein' anxious about stuff that wasn't even happening yet. He was already making his stomach hurt; he wondered if he should take an antacid before he went out tonight. Maybe he should actually eat something instead.

Steve let the dogs out into the backyard and made himself a sandwich. He pulled his tie from work off and stood in front of the sliding-glass door for a moment, chewing absently and staring at Luke and Leia and probably looking like a super-creep.

He wasn't sure what time everybody was heading out or who he would have to pick up; probably Dustin at least, likely Rebecca too. Bill had said he'd meet Steve at seven so he still had some time. They also hadn't clarified exactly where they were going to meet up so that should be fun.

It was the second night of the dumb town carnival and Steve was excited; when he'd been a kid he'd waited all summer for it. Steve loved the carnival. It was kind of nerdy or whatever to admit it but it was true. He hadn't cared too much the last few weeks, when Dust and the rest of the brats had been going on about it, and he hadn't even been that pumped a couple days ago when he and Bill had made plans to go. But now that it was just a few hours away, Steve felt all hyped up, almost like a kid or something.

He wasn't sure exactly what it was. Maybe it had to do with, like, memories of going there with his parents when he was really little, and then later when he'd been older – it was fun to be out with your friends or a girlfriend on your own and feel like a little grown-up. Nostalgia and all, Steve guessed. The Fun Fair always came to Hawkins late in the season, and it had always felt like the last really good, exciting thing about summer before school started and you had to start getting up early again.

Well, not that school was starting for him yet, and he still had to get up early anyway. But summer was ending again so it felt kinda like the same thing – the *sentiment* was the same (maybe. Steve was pretty sure he knew what the word 'sentiment' meant).

He needed to get ready to go so he took his sandwich over to the table and called Dustin up to see what the plan was. The phone rang and rang and went to the answering machine so Steve rolled his eyes and dialed again. Dustin wasn't the kind of kid who screened his calls, but the Hendersons only had one phone in the kitchen and sometimes Dust couldn't hear it if he was being a dork in his room or whatever.

The line almost went to the machine again and then Dustin picked up on the sixth ring. "Hello?"

"Hey, what's up?" Steve asked him. "You almost ready to go, man? Am I still picking you guys up tonight?"

There was this kinda long pause. "Uh, hey," Dust said in a weird voice. "Uh, no. Actually, I ... don't need a ride anymore. I was about to call you."

Oh. Okay. Well, that was nice to know, half an hour beforehand. Steve reminded himself that it was Fun Fair night and he could not be irritated. "Oh, does Becca have her car tonight?"

"Uh, no," Dustin said again, still weird. He coughed exaggeratedly into the phone like a disgusting person. "I actually can't leave the house tonight, you'll have to go without me."

Steve felt surprised, then suspicious. "What, really? What happened?" He didn't think that Dustin's mom would keep him home tonight; she was usually pretty good with letting Dust do whatever he wanted as long as she knew Steve was gonna be there to make sure that he didn't die or get beat up.

"I've just got ... something to do," Dust said all cryptic. "I have a prior obligation."

"What? No you don't." They'd just talked two days ago and Dustin had been bugging the shit out of Steve talking about the carnival on Friday night. "What happened, you don't wanna go now?"

"I don't know, Steve! I have to do something tonight!"

"What exactly do you have to do?" Steve asked incredulously; it was stamp night. You could go on the rides as many times as you wanted, save all your money for greasy food and stupid games. "What, are you kids in a fight again or something?"

"No! I don't know! I'm, like, sick I guess, all right?"

Steve wasn't a genius or a detective but he'd been hanging around Dustin for close to two years and he knew when the kid was lying. "No you're not."

"Yes I am! I have – an issue!"

"Okay, what issue?" Steve asked him.

There was a long pause again. "A ... bowel issue?" Dust tried.

Gross. Steve made a face and put his sandwich down. "Jesus, man, shut the hell up."

“You asked!”

“Are you serious?”

“Uh, maybe!” Dustin said with conviction.

“So take some medicine, it's stamp night,” Steve reminded him. “I believe in you. If you're that worried about it, you can wear, like, an adult diaper or something.”

“Oh, my god, wow, Steve. Did anyone ever tell you that you are like the most hilarious person?” Dustin asked him all annoyed; Steve was cracking himself up. “I *told* you my mom only has those here for when my great-uncle stays over on Easter!”

Steve managed to stop laughing. He got control of himself and ate some more of his sandwich. “Yeah, okay, whatever. Come on. Go get ready, I'm picking you up in like twenty minutes.”

“Uh, no, I really don't feel comfortable leaving my house right now, sorry. I'm sick, I have fallen ill.”

“What? No. Are you kidding?” Steve rolled his eyes and put the phone up to his other ear. “You were fine yesterday.” Dustin didn't answer so Steve pointed out, “You sounded fine two minutes ago.”

“It comes and goes.”

Gross, again. “Come on, man.” Steve wasn't sure why he wanted Dust to be around so badly tonight – actually it would be kind of nice to just go with Billy or whatever. Not like they could really do date stuff but still.

Then again, he'd been alone with Bill a lot this summer. Dustin was his friend, too, and he really was being massively weird right now. “You seriously don't want to go? We talked about this all month, dude. What about Becca, don't you wanna win her, like, a dumb stuffed animal or whatever? Score some points?” Dustin didn't answer him so Steve pressed, “What about the corn dogs, man?”

“Maybe we can go ... like, next week when I feel better,” Dust said reluctantly.

Next week? Everybody knew the best time to go was the first two nights. “No, man, seriously. Half the rides'll be shut down by then.” Okay, so it wasn't the greatest carnival or anything, so what?

“Oh, my god, Steve! I said I can't go, okay? You should be happy, now you don't have to deal with me bugging you all night!”

Steve frowned, hurt. “What, do you really think I think that?”

“I don't know! Look, I have to go, all right?” Dustin said all agitated and then actually hung up on him.

Damn. Well, okay. Steve frowned again and put the phone back down on the receiver. He finished his sandwich and felt kind of grouchy, even though it was carnival night and he was supposed to be in a good mood. He took a shower and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt that he'd stolen from Bill, still feeling grouchy. He wasn't sure if he should just leave it and go or what.

He guessed he was a little worried or something. Dustin might actually just be sick and embarrassed about it, but he might be ... well, Steve wasn't exactly sure. He just knew that Dustin had been acting fucking weird all summer, since the earthquakes and shit had started. Neither of those things were normal. Max and Bill and everybody else would laugh and tell Steve to chill out and say that not everything was about the Upside-Down. Most likely Steve was being stupid.

The thing was, though, that whenever something screwed up happened in Hawkins, it was almost always because of the Upside-Down. Maybe Dustin was, like ... damn, Steve didn't even know. He *did* know that Will Byers had been possessed by some weird alien bug or whatever for almost a year and nobody had known about it.

Steve thought about it some more and then decided to be a pest. He still had some time before he was supposed to meet Billy, anyway.

He let the dogs back in and then sat down in the kitchen with the phone again. He called Rebecca up – he had to find her number in the phone directory so it took a couple minutes. Mostly because Steve always forgot how to spell her last name (it was super Russian or

Ukrainian or something. Was that the same thing?).

Luke and Leia stared intently as Steve finally dialed; they were fascinated by the phone. Then he had to talk to not only Rebecca's mom, but her kid brother too before she came on the line. “*TYLER, GIVE ME THE PHONE,*” Steve heard her shriek. “Dusty?” she said all out of breath. Steve made a face down at Luke.

“No, sorry, it's Steve.”

“Oh, I – hi!” She sounded a little surprised which Steve didn't blame her for. He'd definitely never called her before. “How are you? Sorry, he usually calls me after – what's up?”

“Hey, did you see Dustin at all today?”

“No, not since the weekend. After Saturday, I'm only allowed to be with him in approved spaces with my parents present,” Rebecca informed him.

“Uh ... what was Saturday?” Steve asked, then felt terrified and wished he hadn't asked.

“We took apart my dad's old television set to try and find this part Dustin needed for his HAM radio, my dad was *not* exactly happy. I didn't know he still watched it! The reception's still all fuzzy!”

Oh. Jesus H. Every time Steve got scared that it was gonna be a sex thing with Dustin or something (scared because the thought of Dust doing that stuff was scary) it just ended up being a really dorky thing. “O ... kay,” he said slowly. “Right.”

“We didn't find the part, by the way,” Rebecca informed him. “I told him it was too stupid!”

“Okay, right,” Steve said again. He hoped she wasn't gonna start telling him about the radio, too – every time Dust started talking about audio channels or FM or SSB waves or whatever, Steve pretended to go to sleep, but it probably would be rude to do that to Becca. “So, what happened, are you guys not goin' out tonight now?”

“Oh ... I guess not.” She sounded all glum. “That's why I thought it

was him calling again. He was being really rude to me earlier. I don't know what's up with him. Did he say anything to you?"

"Yeah, I just talked to him too, he was being a crazy freak."

"You say that like it's something new," Rebecca said dryly. She was kinda making Steve smile.

"Okay, is he sick or something?"

Rebecca didn't say anything for a moment. "...No? Why, what happened?"

Huh. "I don't know, it's probably nothing," Steve told her. He didn't really know what to say; he didn't want to make her freak out or feel bad or anything. "I just wanted to know what he told you, if you still wanted to go with Max and all. Last I knew I was pickin' you guys up tonight, now he says he's sick and has to stay home."

There was another pause, this one a little longer. "*Excuse me?*" Rebecca said dangerously; Steve felt scared again.

"Uh, did he not tell you that?"

"No, he – I mean, he didn't say he wasn't feeling well, he said he had to go out to Bloomington with his *mother!*"

Okay. That was weird. First of all there was no way in hell Dustin would hang out with his mom when he could be at the town fair (again: it was *stamp night*). Also, Mrs. Henderson worked like over an hour away during the week – she almost never went out on the weekends, except to her book club or to the general store to gossip with Mrs. Byers. "Yeah, that's weird."

"Do you think he's *lying?*"

Steve felt more scared. He didn't wanna cause some big drama between Dust and his girl or anything. He'd just thought that maybe she would know what was up. She definitely saw Dustin way more than Steve did nowadays.

Obviously Dust *was* lying though, to one of them at least. That was

weird because he never lied. In fact Dustin generally did the opposite of lying; he was annoyingly honest and gave way too many details. "Well, no. I mean, I don't know. I'm sure he's just, like – "

"I think I should go over there," Rebecca said, still in the dangerous voice. "I should – "

"Uh, no," Steve interrupted quickly, still scared. "Look, I, I didn't mean to start some big thing with you guys. I just wanted to know if he said something to you, he's probably just watchin' Star Trek or some shit."

"What? Steve, on *stamp night*? " Becca said incredulously; Steve felt truly understood. "No, there's something wrong. He sounded funny when I talked to him."

Damn. Well, okay. Shit. Steve thought about it. If there was actually a problem or something, he didn't really want her going all the way out to the Hendersons' place by herself. "Yeah, okay. I'll, uh, I, I can pick you up if you want. I'll go with you or whatever." Another underaged girl in his car, that wouldn't be awkward at all.

Becca didn't say anything for a while again; Steve wondered if he was being creepy. "You don't mind?" she asked finally.

"No, why would I?"

"Okay – I mean, yeah, I'd love a ride!"

She sounded surprised again for some reason, like she had when she'd first answered the phone. Steve guessed that they'd never really hung out one-on-one before, but he'd given her tons of rides home from tons of places. He hoped he wasn't being creepy or something. "Okay. I can pick you up right away. We'll just, ah, we'll bully him until he decides to go."

"Thank you. Um. I'll look for your car, then." There was another awkward super-fun moment and then they hung up.

Okay. Steve got his keys and his wallet and headed out. He guessed he was having an adventure. He really hoped that Dustin wasn't possessed or some shit; they were going to miss the damn carnival.

He got his car started again and went to pick up Rebecca. Her house was actually really close to Billy's old place, past the train tracks and three blocks down from the children's library on Birch Street.

The drive only took about ten minutes, and then Steve sat awkwardly parked in front of her house. He'd never driven to Becca's before without Dustin and he wasn't sure if he should go up and knock for her or not – Dust always went up and knocked and then talked to everybody for like five minutes while Steve suffered in the car, but Rebecca definitely wasn't Steve's girl or anything.

She came running across the lawn in another moment though, waving bye to her mom. “Hi, thanks!” she said, getting into the car. She was wearing the same kinda outfit that she always had on, a skirt that went over her knees even though it was summer and a plain button-up blouse. Her brown-black hair was shiny and hung in two thick braids going down her back. “Thank you for picking me up.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“No Billy?” she asked him, looking around. One long braid swung over on shoulder as she clicked on her seatbelt. “Can't believe I get to sit in the front for once.”

Huh. Steve looked at her for a moment; he was expecting to feel weird and then felt surprised when he didn't feel weird. They'd never talked about it of course but he guessed that Rebecca knew about him and Billy. They didn't exactly hide it around the kids, Steve guessed. She went wherever Dustin went, so she was at Bill's place about once a week, too. And she probably *definitely* knew after all the shit had gone down with Billy's dad.

After everything had happened the other week, Steve guessed he felt kind of ... bad or freaked out about people knowing about them now. Not really embarrassed or anything. If people didn't like it that was their problem. But he guessed it had kind of opened his eyes to all the shit that Billy had been scared of before. Steve knew that not everyone was gonna be as bad as Mr. Hargrove, but seeing somebody act like that had made it feel much more real.

Steve didn't want people to treat him or Bill differently just because they were together. It was stupid and he didn't want to feel that way; he didn't want to feel bad or ashamed or like he was doing something wrong. Becca was just talking like normal though which was nice. Steve guessed she wasn't super disgusted by them or anything. "He'll be around later, we're gonna meet everybody there."

"Oh, okay. Max told me seven o'clock." She glared at the clock on Steve's dashboard; it was six twenty-seven. "Dustin is going to make us *late* ," she said darkly, then looked up. "Should we go get him?"

"Yeah, we can try."

They lapsed into awkward silence as Steve turned the car around and got them back onto the main road. He liked Rebecca well enough, he supposed, but they didn't exactly have many things in common.

Rebecca sat facing forward with her face tense and her hands folded in her lap; her posture was so straight that the line of her back didn't even quite touch the seat. She kinda reminded Steve of his mom when he'd first started taking driver's ed and she used to take him out for lessons on the weekend. Every time Steve would brake too hard at a stop sign Mom had screamed like they were about to die – eventually they'd had a fight and she'd just gotten him a driving instructor. He decided not to relate this story to Rebecca.

"He's probably fine, right?" she asked abruptly after about five minutes of awkward silent driving.

"Oh, yeah, sure. I'm sure it's just something totally dumb." Steve wasn't sure what totally dumb thing it could be, though. He could actually feel himself getting more nervous the longer they drove.

They got onto the main highway that led out of town and finally turned off on the road that took them down past the Henderson's place. As soon as you turned off the highway the woods swallowed you up. Usually Steve didn't mind living out in the middle of nowhere but right now it felt a little creepy.

Mrs. Henderson's old Corolla wasn't in the driveway which wasn't immediately alarming or anything – sometimes during the week she

didn't get home til past eight. The porch lights were off but there was a light on in the living room and Steve could see the blue-colored cast of the TV shining through the curtains.

“Ready for this?” he asked Becca as he parked.

“I think so.” She squared her shoulders and got out of the car.

They walked up the long gravel driveway together and then Steve stood back, a little awkward, with his hands in his pockets as Rebecca knocked and hammered on the front door. “Dustin, it's me and Steve! We know you're home!”

There was no response so she knocked some more, then stood staring at the door in silence. She knocked again. “Dusty! Let us in!” Steve looked at his wristwatch: they'd been standing around like idiots for almost five minutes. “Seriously?”

“Uh, okay,” Steve said. He guessed that he needed to do something; they weren't gonna hang around on Dustin's porch all night. He kinda wondered if he should have brought his bat or whatever.

He suddenly felt a little – a lot – stupid, coming out here with Rebecca without telling anyone where they were gonna be. Like, what if there was actually something seriously wrong. He should have called Billy and left a message before he'd left.

Holy shit, what if they all died tonight or something. The Hendersons' place was all the way out in the woods; their closest neighbors were a quarter-mile back up the road. Steve was pretty sure he could protect Rebecca from two or three Demodogs, but he didn't stand a chance against one of the huge freaky *Alien* -looking things. He'd be totally dead and meanwhile Bill would just be pissed off and waiting around at the town fun fair, thinkin' Steve had stood him up. God, Steve was the worst boyfriend ever. Steve'd never even got to tell him –

Okay, no. He was not gonna do that right now. “Okay,” Steve said again, deciding. He backed up til he was almost fallin' off the first porch step, then stretched on his toes and dug around in the ceramic planter that Mrs. Henderson had hanging off the metal railing that sloped along the porch roof. Shit, he really hoped she hadn't moved

the spare key.

Steve got way too much dirt in his hair and finally found purchase, wrapping his hand around the little keychain that was buried near the bottom. Rebecca was staring at him with wide eyes. "Whatdya think, wanna commit a crime?"

"Yeah. Open the door." She had her scary dangerous look on her face again; Steve dusted his hands off on his jeans and put the key in the lock.

The door swung open and they walked into the hall. The light on the wall by the front door was off too – Dustin's house was always dark as shit – but Steve could hear the sound of the television playing and there was a lamp shining further out in the living room.

Rebecca grabbed Steve's arm out of reflex as they went down the hall. Dustin was sitting on the couch, looking perfectly normal and watching TV with his mouth open; his head jerked up all fast like a cartoon and his eyes widened in shock as Steve and Rebecca walked into the room.

"Oh, my god, seriously?" he said, standing up. He knocked into the side of the coffee table with his knee, stumbling a little. Then he stared at them and tore off down the opposite hall to his room like a freakshow. A second later Steve heard the door slam shut.

Rebecca's mouth dropped open and she dropped Steve's arm. Steve said, "Oh, what the fuck, man."

"OKAY," Rebecca said loudly, getting mad. "THIS IS RIDICULOUS!" She stormed off down the little hallway after Dustin; apparently she had no fear of anything. Steve followed after her, feeling a little shellshocked and confused.

Dustin had locked them out of his room too – Rebecca twisted the doorknob and then actually screamed in rage which was more terrifying than two or three Demodogs. "DUSTIN HENDERSON, YOU SNOT BAG, OPEN THE DOOR THIS INSTANT!"

"OH, MY GOD! WHAT ARE YOU GUYS DOING HERE?" Dustin

sounded extremely overwhelmed and not that possessed or anything. Steve kinda felt this made up for all the times that Dust had busted into his place unannounced.

“Yeah, you're not the only person who has access to an extra key, shithead,” he said into the door, then slammed his fist on it twice for good measure. “Let us in, what the shit are you doing?”

“STEVE, WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU? You can't be here right now!”

“Dude, is there something wrong?”

“Yes! Go away! I told you I'm sick!”

“I thought you said you were *with your mother*,” Rebecca said seethingly; from behind the door there was a long and guilty silence. She twisted at the doorknob some more. “Where is she? Can you *please* just tell me what's wrong?” Her voice was getting kind of high and it made Steve feel scared when girls' voices did that. “Just open the door!”

“Rebecca, I love you and my devotion to you is unalterable, that has not changed. I appreciate you coming over here, but I cannot allow you to see me right now,” Dust lisped through the door.

“Thanks, man, I'm here too,” Steve said dryly.

“Oh, sorry! I appreciate you too!”

“Dustin, what the heck are you talking about?” Rebecca's voice was even higher now.

Jesus H. She was gonna start crying soon and that was worse than any monster. Steve banged on the door some more. “Man, you're making her upset, all right? Come on, open up.”

“This isn't your business, Steve! Go away!”

God, he was such a fucking shithead. Steve had gone from feeling a little nervous to being pretty majorly pissed off. “Yeah, actually, I think I can break this door down and make it my business in about

two minutes,” Steve told him. He was pretty sure he could do it, even though Mrs. Henderson would be super ticked off at him. He’d probably get splinters, too. “Open up, I’m not playing around.”

“No, I’m not – ”

“HENDERSON,” Steve said loudly.

There was a scoff from behind the door. “What, are you like turning into Billy now?” he asked; Steve breathed out heavily through his nose.

“Come on, man. I’m serious.”

Dustin sighed and made one of his weird gurgles from behind the door. “Okay, okay, okay,” he said. “Son of a bitch. I’m coming out, please try not to scream.” He waited for what Steve felt was an unnecessarily long pause, then creaked the the door open very slowly. He stepped out of his room stood there in the dim hallway staring at them. “There, are you HAPPY?”

Steve and Rebecca stared at him too. He looked totally normal and not, like, sick or distressed or covered in tentacles, like Steve had been kinda worried about.

Dust looked back at them. “Is that a new blouse?” he asked Becca suddenly; her mouth fell open again and she didn’t answer him.

“Dude, what the HELL is wrong with you?” Steve burst out. “We thought you were having, like, a, a breakdown or something!”

“Okay, do you not see this?” Dustin pointed to his forehead all exaggeratedly; Steve guessed he had a pimple or something. Okay, it was kind of big. It was really red, at any rate. Damn. Actually it was really big. “Oh, Jesus Christ, this is so embarrassing, why did you guys have to come over here?”

Steve stared at him some more. “Are you fucking joking? That’s it? You’re acting like a, a goddamn lunatic because you’ve got a fucking PIMPLE?”

“Uh, what do you mean, THAT’S IT?” Dust asked him. He gestured at

his huge zit again. "THERE'S A FRICKIN' VOLCANO ON MY FACE!"

"*Dustin!* Are you kidding?" Rebecca reached up and threw her arms around his neck; she was the exact same height as Dust so she nearly knocked him over. "We were *worried* about you, you jerk! Do you think I care about a stupid zit?"

"Oh, my god, Rebecca, please don't squeeze me right now! I've popped this thing twice and it's still leaking, it is a bio-hazard." Dust was holding his arms out awkwardly as she hugged him.

Rebecca squeezed him anyway. "Please! I've had like a million of those!"

"I love your pimples, I name them all," Dustin told her (romantically, Steve guessed – he was trying his best not to make a face).

"Oh! Dusty!"

God. It was so gross. They looked like they were about to start tonguin' each other right in the hallway; somehow Steve managed not to scream hysterically. They were going to make him sick, and he hadn't even been on the Gravitron yet. "All right, guys, I'm really happy for you, but can we tone it down with the drama? Like just a little, maybe?"

"Sorry. I'm sorry." Rebecca laughed and let go of Dust.

Steve grabbed Dustin too and then threw him into the wall. "Dude, I am *so close* to kicking your ass, I thought there was something fucking wrong with you!"

"Augh! There is something wrong with me!" Dust said like a dramatic asshole freak.

"Yeah, I definitely believe that." Steve let him go, then slugged him in the shoulder for good measure.

"STOP, OW! What did you even think happened?"

"I don't know, I thought you were, like, like, possessed or some shit!"

“Seriously?” Dustin blinked at him, then grinned like Steve was super hilarious. “Dude, if I was possessed by the Mind Flayer, don't you think I'd be trying to like lure you guys over here?”

Steve was starting to feel pretty stupid again. Excuse him for caring, Jesus H. He guessed he was really dramatic like Max and Bill said. “I don't know!”

“This is really insensitive, Dustin, Steve had to come to my house and pick me up,” Rebecca told him reproachfully.

“I'm sorry.” He seemed more than a little embarrassed, at least. “I didn't want everybody to make fun of me all night.”

“We wouldn't do that!”

“Uh, yeah, that's debatable,” Steve said. He was still more than a little irritated. Dustin gave him his familiar lopsided grin; okay the zit was pretty bad. His hair kinda covered it, though, and it would be dark enough pretty soon. “All right, look, we saw you and it's fine. We fuckin' drove all the way out here, can we please just go to the stupid carnival now?”

“You've made us late, Dustin! Steve is supposed to meet Billy at SEVEN!” Rebecca told him all stern, folding her arms across her chest.

Dustin's face fell and he actually looked super chagrined. “Oh. Sorry, Steve. I really thought you'd go without me.”

Whatever. Steve felt grouchy again. He was still annoyed so he didn't feel like having some big moment with his fucking nerdy-ass friend. “Well, you know, I wasn't going to let your girlfriend come all the way out here by herself.”

“Were you seriously worried about me?”

“I guess, I, I don't know!” Steve snapped. He felt silly; he was being stupid again worrying about Upside-Down shit. A fucking pimple, Jesus Christ. He'd never thought that Dustin would be such a damn wuss. He guessed maybe he'd forgotten what it had felt like to be fifteen. “Can we go or what? You're messing up my night, man.”

“Okay, I guess. I have to get my money. Oh! Hold on!” Dust looked around like a little geek. “Do I have time to change? I wanted to wear the same color shirt as Steve.” Jesus H.

“No, Dustin. We don't have time.” Rebecca's eyes were so huge with rage they looked around ready to pop out of their sockets. “IT'S STAMP NIGHT!” she exploded on him, then started slugging his shoulder in a furious flurry.

“OW! OKAY, OKAY, OKAY! I'M SORRY!” Dustin said, bein' beat on. “Just let me get my jacket! I'm sorry! What happened, you were just hugging me!” Becca slugged him some more.

“God! You're lucky Steve is such a good friend!” Steve didn't know about that; he almost hadn't come over.

Finally Rebecca managed to stop beating Dustin around and they got going. Dustin got his jacket and his baseball cap on and went around, turning lights off in the house. Steve replaced the spare key on the porch (spilling more potting soil on himself and also Dustin, which he didn't feel bad about) and then they headed out to the car again.

“OH MY GOSH, IT'S TEN AFTER SEVEN,” Rebecca gasped like she'd been shot, turning up the radio; she'd called the front seat again. “You better have enough money for the arcade,” she told Dust.

“Of course I do, what do you think?” Dustin was falling all over the backseat because Steve had started driving before he'd gotten buckled in. “Steve, I'm sorry. I'll pay for them to stamp your hand so you can get in, Billy too! It's the least I can do.”

“Whatever. Don't worry about it.” Steve still felt kinda unsettled and jumpy, as if he'd just watched a horror movie or something; he totally should have taken an antacid.

He managed to calm down a little as they got on the highway again back towards town. Aerosmith was on the radio singing 'Angel' and Dustin was annoying the shit out of him, singing the words wrong to Rebecca. “Dude, shut the fuck up, that's not even what he's saying.”

“You don't have to be grouchy because Billy's not here, you'll see him

in like fifteen minutes in the Tunnel of *Looooove*, ” Dustin said like an absolute shitheel.

“Sorry, what was that?” Steve tapped on the brakes and sent Dustin soaring forward into the back of Rebecca's seat. Rebecca screamed and laughed while Dust cursed him out; Steve turned the radio up over him. Jesus Christ, it was too much. He really hoped he could get Billy to buy him a beer.

By the time they got back into town it was almost full dark, purpling clouds giving way to deep clear twilight. Evening was in full swing and all the streetlights were on. The sky had been grey and overcast for most of the morning, and they'd gotten some rain showers earlier when Steve had been at work, but the darkening horizon was clear now and it wasn't too hot or humid out.

The end-of-summer carnival was held at the same spot every year in the huge plaza behind the municipal building, this big field kind of in the middle of town. In the fall it hosted craft gigs and all that stuff; for winter it got turned into the Christmas fair. When Steve had been younger and his parents had actually sort of liked being around each other, they'd almost always gone away somewhere for the holidays – to the mountains, or to see Steve's mom's family out in Pennsylvania – so he'd really only been to Christmas Village a handful of times. He guessed he had always liked the carnival the best.

Everything was all decked out with colored lights and you could see the top of the Ferris wheel and some of the other larger rides already from a few blocks away. Steve turned his car down a side-street and drove slowly, searching out a decent place to park. He had to stop and brake about every four seconds for kids and teens haphazardly crossing the street. They spied Billy's car midway down Park Ave, surprisingly close to the field, but no Max or Bill in sight. Steve really hoped that he wasn't gonna spend half the night looking for everybody.

Finally they found a spot a couple blocks away and set off. Dustin was back to normal, talking away a mile a minute and cracking annoying jokes. It was really crowded once they got to the park –

fairground, whatever – and Steve weaved his way through the tightly clustered throngs of people, saying *hey* every now and then to a few familiar faces as he passed.

“Oh, my god,” Dust said all loud as they came up on the food stalls. “Oh, please. Can we stop and get french fries?”

Steve was still a little ticked off but he felt himself waver – he could always eat. It might take twenty minutes to find everybody: they should have some, like, sustenance or whatever.

Rebecca cut Steve off before he could even speak. “Are you *joking*? No, Dustin! Let's at least meet with everyone first!”

Right. Okay. Priorities. It was nearly seven-thirty — Steve really hoped that Bill wasn't going to be annoyed at him. Steve was pretty sure he'd made a big deal out of meeting up this morning.

They pressed on through the crowds; Steve nearly lost Dustin twice (once to a pizza stall and then to the cotton candy stand). Finally Rebecca stood on her toes and pointed. “Oh, I think I see Max!” She grabbed Steve's arm for a moment all excited. “I bet Billy's still with her!”

Dustin followed her line of sight and then grimaced comically. “Oh, Jesus Christ, no! Are you joking? Will's hanging with his *mom*, what the hell is he even doing?” Rebecca rolled her eyes and yanked him forward with force.

Past the food stalls there was a little clearing with a bunch of wooden picnic tables set up; as they approached Steve spied Max's bright hair right away. She was standing and gabbing away to Will Byers, who was indeed with his mom. Bill was sitting sprawled atop the table beside them and even twenty yards away Steve could instantly tell he was high as shit. Max and Will noticed them at the same time that Becca did and waved them over all excited.

Once they got a little closer Steve realized that Eleven was there too. He almost hadn't recognized her: her usually puffy curly hair was mostly straight and she was wearing, like, normal girl-clothes instead of the overalls or weird oversized shirt-dress things that she usually

had on. She was standing around looking impatient and holding onto the arm of some creepy older dude who was dressed really badly. Steve felt totally confused for a second and then he realized it was Hopper.

Holy God. It was. He looked – well, it was a lot. Steve guessed he'd only ever seen Hop out of his drab policeman getup a couple times; maybe this was his regular at-home attire or something. He was wearing jeans and this really, really bright button-up shirt with tropical flowers and shit on it – Rebecca's mouth fell open for the third time of the night. “Oh, my goodness, is that Mr. Hopper?” she stage-whispered; Steve choked trying not to laugh and she pushed his shoulder.

“Hey, guys,” he said as they walked up.

“Hey! Wow, took you long enough!” Max said dramatically. Bill finally noticed Steve and looked up, giving him a big grin. It was kind of dumb but just being around Billy made Steve feel better in two seconds.

“Dude, what are you doing here with your mom?” Dust demanded of Will, super tactful as usual. “Hi, Mrs. Byers!” he added.

“I'm not *with her*! I was waiting for you guys! She's on, like, a date!”

“Excuse me?” Mrs. Byers said. She looked normal and familiar like she always did – unlike Hop, she was not wearing a glaringly-bright tropical print. “Will Byers, I am *not*!”

“Oh, aren't you? Gee, sorry, I guess I have to re-evaluate my night, then,” Hopper said; Steve was horrified to realize he was probably attempting to flirt. “Hey,” he said, acknowledging Steve. He glanced over at Billy and nodded. “Looks like Prince Charming finally showed up for you, kid.”

“Jim! Seriously?! Do you have to do that?” Mrs. Byers exclaimed, sounding annoyed.

Huh. Steve had sort of forgotten the extremely awkward fact that Hopper definitely knew about him and Billy. He couldn't say that he

was exactly bothered at the moment – he didn't mind being Prince Charming or whatever.

“What? I'm not doing anything. I was *joking* , Joyce, it's this thing that people do,” Hop was telling her all exaggeratedly in his gruff manner. He was eating a corn dog slathered in mustard and Steve felt extremely jealous. “They don't care, I'm being funny.”

“Well, I don't think you're being very appropriate.”

“Oh, tell me. What exactly do you find appropriate?” Hop asked deliberately; Mrs. Byers scoffed and folded her arms up, smiling at him. Wow. It was so interesting.

“It's cool,” Billy put in, ten seconds delayed, very clearly high off his ass. Steve gave Hopper's disturbing shirt a long look and then glanced over at Bill, who started grinning again.

Eleven tugged insistently at Hopper's arm. Her mouth was drawn into a little straight line. “Want to go,” she told him.

Hopper stared down at her, surprised. “What do you mean, you wanna go? We just got here.”

“Want to go with Steve and Billy.”

“ *What?* ” Hop made a face; Steve couldn't really tell if it was a smile or a grimace. “No. Yeah, no, you're not going around with them. No offense,” he said to Steve and Billy. “I'm, I'm here to watch you, Billy's not your damn babysitter tonight.” He took an enormous bite of the corn dog, smearing mustard on his mustache and upper lip. Eleven looked deeply chagrined by him, possibly because of the mustard. She tugged at his arm some more to no avail.

“Hey, where were you guys?” Max asked, distracting Steve from the frankly terrible spectacle of Hop flirting.

Steve decided to save Dustin from some ridicule, at least for a while. “I got outta work late. Were you waiting long?”

“Only like *twenty minutes* .”

“Oh, sorry. Where's Lucas at?” Steve asked her.

Max spread her arms expansively. “Who knows by now! He was watching Erica, last I knew.”

“Who's that?” Bill asked with a blank expression; Max rolled her eyes.

Hopper and Mrs. Byers were still flirting and talking at each other; it was so terrible. Steve guessed he understood why the kids all got so giggly and stupid whenever he and Bill touched each other – it was like a bad movie or something that you couldn't look away from.

“Uh, yeah, Hop, you've got – just a little – ” Mrs. Byers gestured and made a silly face. She reached out and wiped some of the mustard off of his beard with two fingers. Everyone else froze in horror; Billy of course looked totally thrilled like he was watching a comedy act.

“Oh. Jesus Christ.” Hopper grimaced and turned his gaze down to Eleven as if he'd just remembered she was there. “You can't help me out a little, kid?”

“You're not paying attention to me. Can't I go?”

“Well, I – Jesus.” He looked around at all the kids and at Steve and Billy. “Yeah, I, I don't know. There's a lot of people, it's a big place. I don't think I want you to – ”

“You *promised!* ”

“Uh, yeah, I promised you we'd come here, okay, I didn't say – ”

“Oh! Please! She can just hang out with us!” Max appealed to him. Her big eyes were wide and eager. “Please? We can meet up with the rest of the guys and it'll be fine!”

“Yeah! She can stay with us the whole time!” Rebecca put in.

Hopper didn't exactly look reassured. “Ah, yeah, I don't know.”

“Jim, I think she'll be fine,” Mrs. Byers told him. She patted his cheek and then fixed his awful shirt collar; Will, Dustin, Max, and Rebecca made great faces (Steve probably did too). “You gotta loosen the cord

sometime.”

“Okay. Okay, I guess. Yeah. That's fine.” Hop folded in two seconds with Mrs. Byers fawning over him.

She turned severely towards Will. “I want you back here at ten o'clock, all right?”

“What, for real? *Ten?* ” Will pulled a face. “What happened to loosening the cord?”

“What's wrong with ten?”

“I'm not twelve years old anymore! I stay out later when I'm at work!”

Mrs. Byers frowned hugely. “Okay, point. Well, how about ten-thirty?”

“Mom! That's only three hours!”

“How 'bout we make it, uh, eleven?” Hopper said, grinning at his own bad pun. Bill started giggling like a hyena and Max elbowed him hard to shut him up.

“Eleven-thirty?” Will pressed. “It's when the rides shut off and everything.”

Mrs. Byers pressed her lips together and they had a little stare-off. “I — fine, all right. Eleven-thirty. We'll be waiting right here. And don't be late, I mean it.”

“Okay! Thanks Mom! Let's go!” Will saw his escape and took it; he grabbed Max and El by the arms and started dragging them off.

Billy slid off the picnic table and brushed his jeans off. “Later,” he said to Hopper and to Mrs. Byers. “Don't worry, we'll watch 'em.” He grabbed Steve as he walked past and tugged him away too.

They left Hop and Mrs. Byers to do whatever gross grown-up flirty stuff they were gonna do and followed after the brats, trailing a bit behind. Steve waited until they were out of earshot before saying,

"We're not really gonna follow them around all night, are we?"

Billy made a face and rolled his eyes. "Fuck no."

"Okay. Good." Up ahead of them, Rebecca was rolling her eyes at Dustin exclaiming something and Max had her arms slung around Will's and El's shoulders. Steve guessed they were going to try and find Mike and Lucas. Max said joyfully to Dustin, "Dude, what the hell's on your face?" and Rebecca started laughing.

Steve flapped a hand over at Billy. "So when'd, ah, when'd all this happen?"

"What?" Billy turned his head and stared at him with his blue eyes wide. He was so stoned; it was really funny.

"I didn't know you got more weed," Steve said. He didn't mind or anything. Billy didn't even really smoke or drink that much anymore, not like he had last year when Steve had first started hanging around him. He'd thought that if Bill was gonna get high for the carnival, he would've waited for Steve, though, even if Steve wasn't super into that stuff.

"Oh. I didn't." Billy grinned at him. "I was waitin' for you for like a half hour like a fuckin' girlfriend, Bev smoked me up in the car."

"Of course she did." Bill and Beverly would be the cool kids who smoked a joint right out in the middle of Park Ave, two blocks away from the police station. "Sorry I was late, I had an issue," Steve said, using Dustin's phrasing from earlier.

"Yeah? What happened?"

They kept walking and following behind the kids and weaving through the crowds. Steve recounted his evening and Dustin's amazing zit to Billy, a little self-deprecatingly. Bill scoffed and laughed in all the right places as Steve told him about how weird Dustin had been on the phone and how Steve'd been worried that something had been up, how he'd called Rebecca up and gotten dirt in his hair tryin' to get the Henderson's spare key ("Yeah, I noticed that. Thought you did yourself up all special for me," Bill said like a

geek; Steve laughed).

“Well, Rebecca just fucking charged right in there, she didn't need me at all. I guess she really cares about him. It's pretty gross.”

“Yeah. Ain't she cute?” Bill put his hands in his jeans pockets and looked up at the kids walkin' ahead of them. “Nice to have a girl like that.”

Steve made a face. *Cute?* Okay, he was being mean. Rebecca was pretty enough for a kid, and she was nice enough and all, but Steve had always thought she was – well, kind of a nerd. Not that that was bad. She and Dustin were a good match, Steve guessed. “I guess, if that's what you're into,” he said skeptically; Bill laughed at him again.

Finally they ran into Lucas, sitting despondently on a park bench and watching his little sister play the kiddie games with a gaggle of her loud preteen friends.

“God, finally!” he exclaimed as Max went over to him and they linked up arms. “I saw you guys talking to Hopper earlier, I was *not* going over there.”

“Why? He's not that bad,” Max said; Lucas turned to stare at Steve and Billy and rolled his eyes. “Ugh! Don't do that!”

Eleven was looking distressed for some reason. “Mike?” she asked Lucas, twisting her head around as if she could make Mike appear through sheer will.

“Oh. Sorry.” Lucas frowned and shook his head. “No dice, I guess he's still grounded.”

“Really? What'd he do now, what's he grounded for?” Max asked with immediate interest; Lucas and Dustin exchanged a huge look and she scoffed. “*What?*”

Will rolled his eyes. He glanced over at Steve for some reason and then turned back to Lucas and Dustin. “Dude, you can probably just tell them.”

"I don't know. I guess he and Nancy have been fighting, Mike played some huge prank on her. She got really upset or whatever, so their parents grounded him all weekend," Lucas said.

"Really? Why's he fighting with her?" Steve guessed he was kind of curious. He definitely remembered Mike and Nancy arguing all the time, but they'd never really gotten their parents involved with it or anything.

Lucas shrugged all evasive. "Ask Mike," he said. Okay.

"Well, what'd he do to her?" Max demanded (Steve really wanted to know, too. It had to have been something crazy for Mike to get grounded over).

"Do you know?" Dustin asked Lucas. "I didn't really get to talk to him, his parents won't even let him use the phone. His mom hung up on me!"

Max snickered. "You asshole."

"Yeah, he told me this morning. I got him on the walkie. He put this, like, joke dye in Nancy's shampoo last night, turned her hair green," Lucas said matter-of-factly; Max's eyes bugged out in merriment and Billy started cackling.

"Holy *shit!*"

"Yeah, she's really pissed. She starts college next week or something so it's this big deal, I guess."

Okay. Steve had to admit that was pretty mean, but it was maybe a little bit funny, too. He tried not to feel too amused or vindictive. Nancy changed her hair all the time; she'd already went blonde. She could dye her hair again. Oh, god. It probably looked so bad though. He elbowed Bill in an attempt to get him to stop laughing (it didn't work) and asked again, "What are they even fighting about?"

Lucas shrugged once more. "You'd ... have to ask Mike," he said again.

Eleven didn't look particularly concerned over the plight of Nancy's

hair. "He's not coming?"

"Sorry, El," Dust told her. "Don't worry, you'll still have fun with us! Me and Will can show you the best rides to go on, Lucas always throws up on the pirate ship."

"IT WAS ONE TIME! Oh my *god* , it was SIXTH GRADE!" Max laughed and laughed at him.

"I ... I don't know." Eleven looked really hesitant. Steve guessed that even now, Mike was really her best friend out of all the kids. He was suddenly struck by how small she looked; she still looked so much younger than the rest of them. He couldn't imagine El going on the freakin' swinging pirate ship when the lights at the arcade or at the drive-in were too much for her. It wasn't really his place to bring it up though, he figured.

He exchanged a look with Billy, who only shrugged. "Hey, are you gonna be okay?" Steve asked her. He guessed he still felt kinda responsible for her even though Hop had said he and Bill weren't her babysitters. "You want us to stay with you? You can hang around with me and Bill." That didn't exactly sound like the most appealing night, but still.

"Jesus Christ, she's not a baby, Steve!" Dust exclaimed. "We're her friends, she'll be fine with us!"

Bill rolled his eyes and leaned over and cuffed Dustin hard atop the head. "He was asking a fucking question, shithead." He turned towards El. "You gonna be all right?" he asked too.

Eleven squared her shoulders resolutely. "I'm fine." She didn't sound entirely convincing.

"Can stay with us if you want."

"Seriously? No way." Dust was making a face.

"Why not? Man, let her go with them," Lucas said; Max made a huffing noise and pushed at his shoulder.

"Well, but Mike would want – "

“Who cares about Mike? He's not here!”

“No. It's okay.” El shook her head. “Not a baby,” she added, repeating Dustin's words.

Steve and Billy exchanged a look, then Bill shrugged again finally. “Your loss, man.” She smiled at him.

Everyone split up after that; Will and Dustin and Lucas and the girls reassured El that she'd have a good time with them even if Mike couldn't be there and dragged her away. Max hung back for a moment as the group splintered off.

“I just wanna go on like three rides with Lucas, I don't want to deal with Dustin all night.”

“Yeah, I don't blame you,” Steve told her.

“I should ... make sure El's okay. Can I meet you back here in like twenty minutes?” she asked Billy.

“Sure. Whatever.”

“Okay.” She just stood there with her hands in her back pockets, as if she didn't trust them to go off on their own or something. “Are you guys gonna – ”

“ *Max!* ” Lucas called loudly, waving her over.

“OKAY, GOD!” Max yelled her head off. “See you later, Steve! Meet me back here!” She turned and raced off after the rest of the kids.

Bill patted his jacket pocket and pulled out his pack of smokes. He didn't exactly look thrilled or captivated by the magic of the carnival or anything, which made Steve feel the tiniest bit disappointed. “Did you get your hand stamped already?” Steve asked him. He belated remembered that Dust had promised to pay for them. Fucking brat.

Billy made a great face. “My what?”

“You pay like eight bucks and they stamp your hand, you can go on rides all night instead of buying tickets for it.”

“Oh. Right, okay.” He looked kind of clueless.

“It's just for the one night,” Steve explained. “What, they didn't do this out in California?”

“Ah, I dunno.” Billy lit up his cigarette. “I mean, we had the boardwalks and shit. Santa Monica pier's open all year. We didn't really do the whole, yeah, carnival thing. I mean I didn't go to it,” he told Steve.

Oh. Steve felt a little silly and immature all of a sudden, kind of like a geeky kid or something. Billy had said before that he hadn't really lived in the city before, but Steve always pictured him doing cool urban shit out in California anyway. Bill probably thought the little town fair (and Steve) was totally lame. Steve realized that even though they'd made plans to go, he hadn't actually asked Billy if he'd *wanted to* or anything.

They wouldn't even be able to do like half of the rides anyway – it'd look way too weird for two guys to be on the Tilt-a-Whirl together. Maybe they should have actually stuck around the kids. “Did you even want to come tonight?” Steve asked him, a little reluctantly. “I mean, we don't have to stay here, we can do something else.”

Billy scrunched his face up like Steve was talking some type of alien language. “Yeah, sure I wanted to come.”

“We can go someplace else if you want. See a movie or something, or I dunno, go bowling.”

“Oh, wow. Yeah, bowling. Thrill me, Harrington,” Billy drawled; he had his face on that said he thought Steve was being really funny (that was fine aside from the times when Steve actually wasn't being funny).

“I just mean – ”

“Man, shut the fuck up.” Billy clapped him on the shoulder and nearly burned Steve's ear with his cigarette. “I'm here, ain't I? Come on. I'm down to go on some rides.”

“Okay. I was just checking.”

“So take me to go get branded or whatever. You can buy me some food too, I didn't eat at work,” Bill told him.

“Okay.” Steve felt a little better.

They went and got their hands stamped and then Steve bought Billy some food. Steve drank a Slurpee (blue, the only good kind) and watched Billy demolish two slices of pizza and some really disgusting soggy cheese fries. “Yo, they really set up that rollercoaster in like two days?” he asked Steve. He licked his fingers like a gross person.

“Uh, no. It's actually here all year, you just never noticed it before.” Bill rolled his eyes and stole Steve's slushie. “You should slow down, you're going to puke on the Gravitron,” Steve warned him.

Billy gave him an evil look and wandered off to make Steve pay for more food. He was cramming a disturbing amount of funnel cake into his mouth when he caught sight of something over Steve's shoulder and got a huge grin on his face.

“Oh, shit! Hang on. I wanna talk to somebody from school.” He shoved the paper plate into Steve's hands and then grabbed Steve's shoulder. “YO, ANGIE!” he bellowed out like a nutcase, yanking Steve along with him.

Huh. Okay. Steve almost fell over and was forced to follow. He took a moment to feel surprised that Bill wanted to see *anyone* from school. The way he talked, he'd wanted to set Hawkins High on fire the whole time he'd been going there – Steve had felt relieved when Billy'd graduated and hadn't been suspended or expelled for causing anyone, like, egregious bodily harm.

They made their way through the huge crowd and finally Steve caught sight of Bill's rather unremarkable target – this girl Angela Davis was standing by herself by the outskirts of the lot, drinking a soda and leaning despondently with her back against the counter of an abandoned food stand.

She glanced over as they got closer and straightened up, clutching her red cup and starting to smile. “Hi! Billy! Where've you – oh!” Her eyes widened in surprise when she noticed Steve. “Hey, Steve, wow!

How are you?"

"Hey, Angela, how you been?" Steve knew Angela Davis casually – she'd been a year below him, in Bill and Nancy's grade. She must've just graduated too. She'd kinda been in Nancy's crowd when he and Nancy had been going together; he thought they'd been in journalism or something together. She wasn't exactly a stone cold bitch or anything, and she was cute enough, but Steve had always found her a little off-putting for some reason.

No, that wasn't quite the word – intimidating, maybe. She was real serious and shit, super into her grades and all that, even more than Nancy. Steve'd hung out with her a few times before in a group and had seen her smile maybe two whole times. She almost never came out to the parties or anything. At Bill's graduation, she'd been second in the class and had given some speech that Steve had kinda zoned out during. She'd definitely never seemed like somebody Billy would want to be friends with. It was just a little weird, was all.

Bill actually looked really happy to see her, though, or maybe it was just the after-effects of being high. He was grinning like a maniac and had powdered sugar on the collar of his jean jacket and he looked totally silly. "Hey, where's your brothers at? Why you standin' over here in the dark?" he asked her. "You meeting somebody later?"

"Umm. No, I'm, I'm not – I was about to leave, actually, I think."

"Seriously? It's early."

"I was just – "

"You ain't with somebody?"

"Uh, no. I – " Angela laughed abruptly. She glanced around and seemed sort of uncomfortable for some reason. She brushed her dark hair behind her ears and then glared suddenly (yep, totally scary, Steve thought). "Listen, don't make fun of me, all right?"

Billy's grin deepened; he was such a flirt. "Oh, me? Never."

"I'm serious, Billy!"

“Aren't ya always?”

Angela smiled back at him for a second, then huffed out a huge sigh. “All right, fine. This is so stupid. So, like, Jeanie – oh, you don't know her – she set me up with this guy she knows from Eastgate. I talked to him on the phone the other night, he said he'd meet me here. Like a ... you know, a, a blind date or whatever. I've never seen him before. That's why I'm wearing this thing.” She held her arms out; she was wearing a huge yellow off-the-shoulder sweater. It was disturbingly fuzzy and clashed pretty terribly with her blue-framed glasses. “I guess I got stood up, I've been waiting for over an hour. I circled the whole place, like, three times already.”

“Are you kidding?” Steve asked, aghast. Damn. He actually felt really bad. “Jesus, that sucks.”

“I know. He's probably somewhere in the bushes laughing at me. I never go out with anybody, I feel totally dumb.”

What a creep. “Yeah, well, that's his loss, anyway.”

“I guess. I dunno. I'm just ready to go home,” Angela told them. She looked really dejected and all.

Billy leaned over and threw an arm around her shoulder. “What? Man, no way,” he said. “Hang out with us, we ain't got dates.”

Angela actually laughed instead of punching him in the face; she really had done that to a guy two years ago, Steve had heard (another reason why she was kind of intimidating. Billy was really brave). “Get off of me, I mean it.”

“Hang out with us,” Bill told her again, making no sign of moving away. He shifted in closer to her and made his eyes all big like when he was tryin' to be cute. “C'mon, Angie. You know you wanna.”

“I really don't.” Angela was trying to look cross with him and failing. She gave up and laughed again instead. “No! No way, that's okay. I didn't really bring any money anyway. I spent it all on this stupid-ass sweater!” Billy cracked up at her.

Steve wasn't sure how he felt about having Angela Davis tag along

with him and Bill all night, especially if Billy was gonna be hanging all over her the whole time. It didn't mean anything, but Steve was pretty sure if he acted this way around some girl, Billy would lose his damn mind.

He didn't really know what he'd been imagining – some perfect world where he and Billy could actually go on the Tunnel of Love together or whatever, he guessed. Obviously that couldn't really happen, not in Hawkins at least. But he did feel kinda bad, and Angela was Billy's friend, after all, for whatever reason. “No, come on,” he said. “Seriously. We can spot you some cash. It's stamp night, anyway.” Billy grinned at him and made a face.

Angela frowned. “You guys don't mind me crashing your night?” she asked doubtfully.

“Uh, no. It's just us here.” Steve wondered if maybe that made them seem too gay or something. “We're supposed to hang out with Bill's sister, so.”

“Well ... okay. Okay, I guess. If you're sure you don't care.”

“There ya go,” Billy said, triumphant. He slung his other arm around Steve's shoulder and leaned heavily, tugging everyone forward. They went back around to the front of the park and waited in line again. Billy paid for Angela to get her hand stamped, then they headed back towards the rides and stuff.

“Are you gonna finish that funnel cake?” Angela asked them; Steve handed it over to her.

Bill was actually talking to Angela kind of a lot – Steve guessed he hadn't seen her since his graduation. He was pretty sure that Billy had even been to her house a couple times before school had ended, studying and shit.

It was weird to see Billy actually interested in what somebody else had to say: Steve had to admit he felt a little neglected. Bill asked her what she'd been doing all summer and if she'd gotten that job that she wanted (“No, I'm working at McDonald's,” Angela told him, pulling a face). He asked her if her brothers were doing okay and if

she was heading out to State soon. "Stevie's going there next semester," Bill told her, which as of yet was a lie.

"Are you really? Lucky," Angela commented (Steve didn't know what was so lucky about a state school. Angela was super smart – she'd probably gotten into tons of places). "Maybe I'll get there in two years, if I can get a scholarship or some more financial aid. My family doesn't have the money for all that. Hey, I'm actually taking some classes at Ivy Tech, well I just started. Did you get into that welding program you were talkin' about before?" she demanded of Billy. "I know you signed up late."

"Yeah, my boss wrote me a letter. It's no big deal." They got into a huge conversation about the campus and the student lounge and how the cafeteria food was actually really great.

"They have so many coffees, did you ever try their iced lattes?"

"I dunno what that is, man," Bill told her; she grinned at him.

They bumped into Max in line with the rest of the kids for some lame baby dragon roller-coaster ride; Bill yanked hard on her ponytail and Max turned around, already scowling. She separated from El and Becca and the guys and then she and Angela started gossiping with each other all excited. Steve wasn't really sure how they knew each other but it seemed like girls always found some shit to gab about in two seconds.

Bill slowed down and pulled Steve aside as the girls walked together in front of them, talking away. He seemed less goofy now and he actually looked serious for a second, blue eyes solemn as they searched Steve's face. "Hey, we cool?"

"Uh. Yeah, sure, why?" Steve didn't really know why he was asking.

"I don't want you to be pissed at me. I just wanted to be with you tonight," Billy told him, voice pitched low. "You want Angie to screw off? I can tell her t'go away if you want."

Oh. Huh. Steve felt surprised. He'd felt kind of awkward or out-of-it a couple minutes ago when Bill and Angela had been chatting up a

storm, but he wasn't mad or upset or anything. He knew that Billy hadn't been planning to run into her, and it sucked that she'd been ditched. Billy was so – he could be so damn oblivious; he probably didn't even realize he'd been flirting like a madman.

It was weirdly nice to be asked about it. Bill always just did whatever he wanted, but lately he'd been proving again and again that he actually cared about how Steve felt. “Oh. Nah, she's okay. I don't mind, it's fine.”

“I just ain't seen her in a while.”

“No, it's really fine. Seriously. I don't care who we hang out with.” Bill had suffered a bunch of times this summer hanging around with Alex for Steve; it had actually taken great effort not to invite him along tonight. Steve could deal with Angela Davis for three hours or whatever (as long as she didn't punch him). “Not like we could really go on the Ferris Wheel together anyway.”

Billy made an extremely terrible face. “You wouldn't really make me do that shit, right?” He made Steve laugh.

It actually ended up being better with Angela tagging along, anyway – with Max there too, they made two pairs and could go on rides together without it looking weird. Max looped her arm through Steve's and let him have the rest of her soda as they waited in line for the Vertigo. “So are you actually having fun, or is Billy being totally stupid?” she whispered up at him.

“No, we're good, I think,” Steve told her, then was surprised to realize he actually felt okay.

They went on a bunch of rides together and it was a fun time, normal like Steve had wanted. Billy laughed like a maniac and screamed his head off in Steve's face on the Tilt-a-Whirl and on the Gravitron and on the swinging Pirate Ship. It was totally dumb but Steve was gonna remember how happy he looked later.

Steve didn't know if it made him a wuss or not but the Pirate Ship had always made him feel a little sick – it was too freaky when it actually went all the way upside down and you felt like you were

gonna fall out of your seatbelt. By the time they'd gone on that and the rickety roller-coaster ride two times he kinda felt like he needed a break. He'd been going on the coaster since he was nine and every year it felt more and more like the carts were gonna go off the tracks at any second.

"Okay, can I call a time-out?" Max asked as they stumbled out of the exit line and weaved through the crowd. She and Angela both had super crazy wild hair from the rides and the wind and all that.

A little while earlier, when they'd been waiting for the roller coaster the first time, there had been some kinda commotion near the west end of the park – a bunch of kids screaming and stuff, only for a minute or two. It seemed like there were way more people around now so maybe a ride had broke down or something. Max scowled as some kid walking too close stomped on her foot as he passed. "WATCH IT! God, I think I broke my back on that thing, I can't stand in line again for a while. Can we get drinks or something?"

"Yeah. I need a soda." Bill was pulling out his wallet and handing her a couple dollars. "You want somethin'?" he asked Steve.

"Sure, a water, I guess. Thanks."

The girls wandered off to get their sodas and Steve and Billy walked a little farther until they found an empty bench to sit on, close to the carousel and the little-kid rides. Billy collapsed down next to him and they sat there for a few minutes watching people walk by, worn out and not needing to talk.

Billy's hair was all crazy too, curls frizzing out against his jacket collar, and he smelled like sweat and smoke and gross greasy fried food. Something about his nearness after being kinda apart all night made Steve feel a little nuts or something, just for a moment. He forgot all about Max and Angela and the promise of overpriced carnival games; he wanted to take Billy and go home. It felt unfair that there were so many people around. If he could just touch him one time.

"Okay," Bill announced loudly. He leaned back and slung an arm around the back of the bench, apparently unaware of Steve's

incredible surge of lust or whatever. "I'm actually having fun."

Steve stared at him for a second and then managed to get control of himself. "Yeah, I can tell. God, I didn't think you could yell that loud."

Billy threw his head back and laughed. "I told Max earlier if she got scared I'd scream harder than her."

Huh. Steve guessed that she had been pretty freaked out on *The Vertigo*. "I guess that's ... sweet of you?" he offered; Billy laughed again.

"Don't think Angie liked it too much," he said, grinning. "Max ain't been to this carnival joint either since we moved. My dad wouldn't let her go last summer."

"That blows." Steve thought about it and decided not to bring up Bill's dad; he'd asked enough questions last night. "So how was your work?" he asked instead.

"Ah, was all right. We had to replace a engine cradle on this Hyundai today, I dropped a fucking wrench on my face when I was under it." Steve laughed and Billy scowled at him. "I'm not joking, asshole. Fucking hurt." He pushed his hair aside to show Steve – he actually had a wicked little bruise on his temple.

"Oh, shit, man." Well, they were in public so Steve couldn't kiss it or be too sweet to him. "Could have been your nose," he pointed out.

Billy scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, could only improve it, right?" Steve laughed again. Billy was crazy; his nose was fine. "Yo, I got so many fuckin' jobs comin' up, I don't wanna leave Hank too much shit to do when we leave."

They were going out to Lake Michigan in about two weeks – Bill said he was really lucky to be able to get more time off. With the way the weekends worked out, they'd be there for twelve whole days before Max had to come back to start school. They'd be there for Labor Day which would be cool.

Steve was super excited but he also felt the tiniest bit nervous, too.

He'd never really been on vacation with anybody aside from his family or Tommy's family. He'd gone to the state park for a day with Nancy and her mom and dad and Mike two summers ago; it had been fun enough til Nance'd gotten ticked off at him for trying to put sunscreen on her back in front of her parents. "Do you think we can actually spend more than a week together without wantin' to kill each other?"

Billy grinned at him, and – damn, Steve really wanted him. "Guess we'll see." Then his gaze shifted a little and he sat up, looking forward and tilting his chin up. "Yo, incoming."

"What?" Steve turned to look too. Max and Angela were coming back over with not just drinks but the rest of the Monster Squad in tow – Steve heard Dustin and Will's agitated voices and glanced over again, surprised, as the kids flocked towards them.

Angela was in the forefront of the group with a puzzled expression on her face; she was holding a soda in each hand and balancing a water bottle in the crook of her arm. Eleven's face was bright red like she'd been crying and she had Max's arm around her hunched-up shoulders. Behind them, Dustin and Will were arguing with each other, while Lucas trailed even further behind. He seemed annoyed and had his hands in his pockets.

"Oh god, what the hell happened?" Steve asked automatically, sitting up too. If El had really been crying, Hop was probably going to kill them all.

Dustin pressed forward from the group, knocking into Angela a little, sending a little bit of soda sloshing from one cup and earning a truly repugnant look from her. "Holy shit, Steve, you won't believe this! There was – "

Billy leaned forward and narrowed his eyes at him. "Man, the fuck did you do now?"

"Noth – *I* didn't do anything! El's the one who totally freaked out and BROKE THE GRAVITRON!" Dust yelled at the top of his lungs.

Holy crap. " *What?* " Steve said.

“I SAID, SHE – ”

“Dude! Seriously? Shut the hell up!” Lucas shoved Dustin in the back.

“Excuse me, she *what?* ” Angela repeated incredulously; everyone glared at Dustin. “Are you joking?”

“Uhhh. Ha ha,” Dust said with everyone staring daggers at him. He clutched at Rebecca for protection. “Do you guys not understand sarcasm? Obviously she just got scared so they ... stopped the ride.”

Angela's brow furrowed. “Wait, is that what all that yelling was earlier?”

“Dude, are you kidding me?” Steve asked him. Dustin could be so damn dense sometimes; it was actually painful. “She's never been on a roller-coaster ride before, so you decided to take her on the frickin' Gravitron for her first try?”

“SHE SAID IT WAS FINE!”

“Well, we *did* go on the Dragon Spin first,” Lucas pointed out; Max rolled her eyes at him.

Billy was rubbing at the side of his face in this familiar way, like he usually did when all the kids were agitating him too much. “Okay, hang on. So what exactly – ”

“Sorry, I am so confused right now,” Angela interrupted him. “What? She never went on a roller coaster before?” Oops. Okay, Steve was pretty damn dense, too, he supposed. “Hey, are you all right?” she asked El in concern, leaning over, then frowned. “Do you ... go to the high school?”

Eleven lowered her gaze and didn't answer. Her face was still red and she looked totally miserable and, like, embarrassed or something, Steve guessed.

“Uh, she's from out of town,” Will said quickly, stepping between the girls; Dust added, “She's Mormon! It's really sad, they can't even use electricity after six PM. Lots of new stuff for her tonight.”

“Is that so.” Angela looked extremely skeptical.

Lucas groaned at Dustin being a total idiot. “Oh my god, stop saying things.”

“Did anyone get *hurt*? ”

“No! She just got scared!” Max told Angela, sounding surprisingly aggressive for someone who'd just been gabbing away with her five minutes ago. She still had her arm slung protectively around El's shoulder. “It's *not* a big deal.”

Angela blinked, taken aback. “All right. Didn't say it was. I was just asking.”

“Okay, look,” Bill said loudly, leaning forward again. The kids plus Angela looked over at him. “So nobody frickin' died or broke their arm or nothin', right?”

“Actually I have pretty severe neck pains right now,” Dustin put in; Bill stared at him for a long time and didn't say anything. “No, I guess it's fine,” Dust said, deflated.

“All right, so no big. You're okay, right?” Billy asked Eleven. “Been through worse, huh?”

She looked at him, for a long time too, and then gave a little nod. “I'm okay.”

Everyone stood and sat around for a moment, awkward. After a couple seconds Angela sighed loudly and shifted the drinks she was holding. “Do you guys still want these or what?”

“Oh. Right. Yeah, thanks.” Billy stood up and took his soda from her, then handed Steve his water.

Will and Lucas and Dustin were whispering away together. In just about in a minute everyone had kind of splintered off into a trio of weird little groups: Steve and Bill and Angela, Dustin and the guys, Max and El and Becca.

Angela still looked pretty confused and also a little bit bored. “Have

you got a cigarette?" she asked Billy, shocking the hell out of Steve.

"Nah, I'm out. Sorry." He'd been talking and chain-smoking all night in line for the rides; Steve had known he was gonna run out.

Steve wasn't much of a smoker – his mom would kill him – but he usually kept a pack on him, in case Bill needed some or if they were gonna be drinking or whatever. "Hang on. I've got some." He dug around in his jeans. The cigarettes was a little smushed from being jerked around on the rides but mostly still intact; Steve handed one of the least crushed-up ones over to Angela and then gave her his lighter too.

"Oh, thanks." She lit up and made a little face. "Ugh, menthol. Nice lighter, by the way. Where'd you get it?"

Haha. "It was a gift," Steve told her.

The brats were growing restless. "Okay, so, what, are we just going to stand around for the rest of the night?" Lucas asked. He still looked super annoyed, Steve guessed because of Eleven or something. "We can't go on any more rides now?"

"Could you just give us a like a *minute* to chill out?" Max looked massively irritated by him.

"Uh, it's been like twenty! Will has to meet his mom in an hour!"

"So? That's still an hour."

Lucas groaned loudly. "Oh, my god. Okay. You always take her side, this always happens when she's around. Uh, no offense," he added offhandedly to El; she just stared back at him, face blank.

Max twisted her face up. "God, Lucas! You're being a *huge asshole*, " she said, eyes narrowing as she stepped closer to him. They looked like they were about to get into one of their famous screaming matches. Angela looked truly fascinated by them; Steve supposed she'd never gotten to witness one before.

"Oh, sure! I'm an asshole because I want to go on rides with my girlfriend!"

“No, it's because you're being insensitive!”

“I DIDN'T SAY WE HAD TO – ”

“GUYS!” Steve interrupted them loudly. Lucas and Max looked over, startled. “Look, I don't wanna hear this shit! Why don't you, ah, go around for a while, I'll just sit with El til she feels better.” He kind of wanted a break from the rides anyway; his stomach still hurt from the pirate ship. Should have taken the antacid, Steve thought again.

The kids looked doubtful. “Uh, but we're supposed to stay with her,” Dust pointed out.

“Yeah, man. Looks like that's gone great so far,” Bill said dryly. “Just get outta my face, we can hang with her.”

Max was peering at Eleven all serious. She had both her hands on El's shoulders, steadying her. “Do you want to stay with Steve and Billy?” she asked. She sounded kinda like a divorced mom dropping her kid off for a visit or something; Steve struggled not to make a comment.

“I guess,” El said in a subdued tone. What a ringing endorsement.

She sat down on the bench next to Steve and the brats headed off again with Max looking hesitantly over her shoulder. Angela was still staring at El all curious and Steve hoped she wasn't going to ask a bunch of questions. He was bad at lying and he didn't know what-all Max or the rest of the kids had said earlier.

“What you wanna do?” Bill asked them. He was looking around and he kinda looked like he really wanted to go on the roller coaster again, or at least be walking around and doing shit. He probably felt obligated to stay and hang around with Eleven; Steve decided to let him off the hook.

“You guys can go and catch up with Max and all them, we'll just sit here for a while.”

Billy hesitated, then made a face and shook his head. “No, man. That's okay. I ain't ditchin' nobody.”

“Yeah, we can just hang out here,” Angela said. She smiled

encouragingly at Eleven, who shifted her gaze away and stared resolutely down at her lap.

“It's seriously fine, I got it,” Steve told them. “We can meet up with you later.”

Billy was smiling at him. “Tryin' to get rid of me?”

“No, I'm not. I want you to have fun.”

“Yeah?” Bill scratched his neck and turned towards Eleven. “What you wanna do, kid?” he asked her. “We can hang out with ya, just play the games or whatever.”

She looked slowly between the two of them, considering. “I can ... stay with Steve,” she said after a long moment.

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“We'll be fine, Bill. Kids love me,” Steve pointed out; Billy looked extremely amused by him for some reason.

“Yeah, okay. So what, wanna go on the rollercoaster again?” he asked Angela.

“Sure, I guess.”

“We'll only be like ten minutes,” Bill told him. Steve had known he still wanted to go on the rides.

“Okay, yeah. Hey, gimme your soda.”

Bill handed it over. Steve watched him walk off all buddy-buddy with Angela, then realized he was now faced with the difficult task of entertaining a moody thirteen-year-old girl that he didn't really know. “Hey, are you really all right?” he asked Eleven, turning a little on the bench to face her.

She still looked pretty unhappy and Steve felt bad - she'd definitely been crying. She'd probably just wanted to see Mike and go on the

Ferris Wheel with him and corny movie shit like that. Now her friends had left and she was stuck sitting on a park bench with Steve. He wondered if she'd even got to buy any snacks. "Want the soda?" he asked her.

El took the soda from him and held it, still looking down at her lap. "I'm fine now," she said softly. "Feel like a baby."

"Ah, hey, no, you don't have to feel bad." Steve struggled to think up something to say to her that didn't sound insensitive or, like, patronizing or anything. *It's not your fault you don't know how to act normal* probably wasn't great. "This is, like, your first carnival, right? You didn't go last year?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "I saw it on the TV before. I know it's supposed to be ... fun. But it wasn't fun. Just. Felt like ... being trapped again."

Oh. Damn. Yeah, they probably really shouldn't have taken her on the Gravitron. Steve could see how if you'd been stuck in basically a prison cell for most of your life and then your friends made you go on a giant metal machine that spun around really fast and stuck you to a wall, it wouldn't exactly feel great.

"Uh, yeah. I don't really know why we like that stuff," Steve told her. He added, "You're actually kind of saving me right now, I really didn't feel like goin' on any more roller coasters." Eleven gave him a little look that said she knew he was full of shit. "Did you really break the ride?"

"Yes. I stopped it. Everyone fell over."

Heh. Kinda cool, Steve thought. Especially since he hadn't been on the ride at the time. "How'd you even do that? Like how did you know how to do that?" he asked her.

Eleven shrugged like it was no big deal. "I could see the ... I could see inside the machine. I stopped the ... big spinning thing." The gears or whatever, Steve guessed.

"You can really do that?"

"I guess so."

Totally weird. Well, he'd known she could go in people's heads and stuff. He hadn't really known that she actually had, like, serious x-ray vision or whatever too. A long time ago, he'd told Billy, *she's basically a weapon*. Hopefully she wasn't hearing that.

It was past ten now and the night air was growing colder so Steve gave El his jacket to wear. Everything was still all lit up but most of the kiddie rides had been shut down and there were fewer people around, mostly older couples. Steve suddenly felt a little awkward: he hadn't exactly thought this through. He probably looked like a total creep or a pervert sitting around with a little kid.

They sat there for a couple minutes, not really talking. Not really talking made Steve feel uncomfortable so he started telling El about the time when he'd been in ninth grade and he and Tommy and Carol and Alex had gone to the fun fair together. Tommy and Carol hadn't been dating for that long. The Ferris Wheel had broken down and Steve and Carol had been stuck on it together for two hours; Tommy'd wanted to kill him. Alex still said it had been the worst night because he'd had to hang out with Tommy on his own for two hours.

"Do you miss your friends?" El asked him suddenly. She was actually looking at him now.

"Oh. Uh, I don't know." Steve wasn't sure how to answer her. Everything was so different from how it'd been a year ago, two years, three. You couldn't really say. He guessed he could admit that he didn't really miss Tommy. "I mean, I still talk to Alex. You met him." She nodded and smiled; everybody always liked Alex. "I guess I, yeah, I miss hangin' out with Carol sometimes. I could tell her a lot of stuff. But I, you know, I've got different friends now."

"I'm your friend."

Steve wasn't sure if she was asking him or telling him. Even so he felt pretty touched. She hadn't liked him for so long, it felt like. "Yeah, I guess we are."

El was still staring at him. "Thanks. For staying with me."

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Steve said, awkward. He knew she'd probably rather have Bill or Max with her. “No problem. Uh, whatever I can do.”

They sat for a little longer and then Steve was suddenly blinded by a weird light coming at them. After a moment he realized it was some asshole tearing towards them on a bike with one of those stupid blinking headlights on it. “EL! ELEVEN!” the kid yelled out like a crazy person – it was Mike Wheeler, of course.

Mike skidded to a stop in front of them, nearly crashing into the bench. “Hey! I couldn't find you, I thought you went home!” he said, dismounting from his bike and letting it drop to the ground. Then he noticed Steve and did a double take. “What are you doing here?” For once he just sounded totally puzzled and not super pissed off or irritated at Steve's presence. Damn, carnival night was full of surprises.

“I got sick of the rides, El's hanging out with me.”

“Oh. Uh, okay.” Mike still looked baffled. He also appeared to be wearing his pajamas.

Eleven gave Steve a look. “You don't have to do that,” she said. She turned back towards Mike and told him, “I broke the Gravitron.”

Mike's eyes practically bugged out of his head. “*What?* Are you okay?” He grabbed El's hands all dramatic and she stood up, then they hugged each other, a little awkwardly. Steve tried not to roll his eyes at their emotional reunion. “Sorry I couldn't get here til just now, I had to wait for my parents to go to bed. My whole house is, like, *majorly* pissed at me.”

“Hey, so what's the deal with you and Nancy?” Steve asked him. “What's going on?”

Mike tore his gaze from Eleven and made a face. He looked like he'd already completely forgotten that Steve was there too, sitting about a foot away. “What? Why, are you going to lecture me for ten minutes like you always do?” he asked in his usual shit-eating tone.

Geez. Steve made a face back at him. He wondered if all the other kids thought he was a great big nag, too. He totally didn't lecture people, at least he didn't think. He'd have to ask Billy. Actually, maybe that was a bad idea. "Uh, no, asshole. I'm just curious. Why are you playin' pranks on her?"

Mike just stared at him with an unreadable expression, for a long time. It was a little weird; after a moment Steve thought that maybe he just wasn't going to answer at all. Then his lip curled and he spit out, "Because she was – I mean – because she's a stuck-up *asshole* who thinks the whole world revolves around her! Why do you care?"

Huh. "I don't really care," Steve told him. Okay, now he wanted to know even more.

"Uh, you asking implies that you care," Mike informed him like a shitheel.

"No it doesn't."

"Yes it does!"

"No, it really doesn't, I was asking a question."

"Yeah, a question about my stupid sister, you *always* –"

"MIKE!" Eleven said loudly, interrupting their budding argument. "Stop fighting!"

"Huh?" Mike turned to her, surprised. "We're not fighting. It's just Steve."

Damn. He was so sweet. Steve felt a little grouchy again; he'd just kept Mike's weird girlfriend company for like twenty minutes. "Yeah, look, I know you hate me or whatever, you could be less obnoxious about it."

Mike actually looked surprised. "What?" he said. "I don't hate you."

Oh. Huh. Steve had no clue what to say. He'd thought it was just another one of the facts of life: the sky was blue, water was wet, Billy was hot, and Mike Wheeler inexplicably hated Steve's guts. "Uh,

okay. Whatever.”

“I don't hate you,” Mike said again. “I – is that what you think? I thought this was just, like, what we do.” He looked at El. “Did you tell him I hated him?” His expression darkened. “WHY ARE YOU WEARING HIS JACKET?” he demanded; El started laughing at his face.

Everyone else was coming over again, saving Steve from the pain of having to deal with Mike Wheeler on his own. Billy stood behind Steve by the bench and grabbed Steve's shoulders and shook him around. “You okay?”

“Quit manhandling me, I got a crick in my neck,” Steve complained, then realized he sounded like a whiny bitch. “What ride did ya go on, the roller coaster?”

Billy's voice was really close to Steve's ear and he sounded like he was grinning. “Yeah. Henderson lost his baseball cap and his zit popped again,” he told Steve; that was great information.

Angela grimaced hugely. “Please stop talking about it.”

It was nearing ten-thirty so they decided to waste the rest of their time playing the rigged-up carnival games. To her credit, Angela didn't seem bothered or annoyed to be hanging out with a bunch of fifteen-year-olds. Bill had said before that she had a lot of younger brothers so maybe that was why. She and Max bought a plate of nachos to share and then they stood around with the group, watching Mike and Dustin be spectacularly bad at games.

“God, he's really terrible!” Angela commented wonderingly as Mike lost another dollar to the ring toss. He seemed to be determined to win some sort of stuffed animal for El – so far it wasn't going too great. “How much money did he spend already?”

“I think it's up to like five bucks,” Steve said.

“No, he's at six now,” Will corrected him.

“Jesus.”

Max was chomping away at her nachos like a starving orphan. She scrunched her face up, still chewing, and allowed Lucas to steal a couple. "It's truly pathetic, isn't it? Heartbreaking, almost."

"I can HEAR YOU, assholes!" Mike said without turning around; Angela started laughing.

"Are these games really rigged?" she asked Steve and Billy. "My brother usually wins one thing right away."

Steve shrugged. The guys had moved onto a different endeavor now, that game where you had to knock down a pyramid of tin cans with a bean-bag. "I think it's kinda rigged, yeah. Like the cans and stuff are weighted down, they're heavier than they're supposed to be." He watched as Dust lobbed his bean-bag haphazardly and widely missed even coming close to the stacked triangle; Rebecca looked distressed for him. "Uh, but I dunno if that's what's happening right now."

"Mm. Think they're just real bad," Bill said wisely.

"How come aren't you trying to win somethin' for Max?" Angela asked Lucas.

"I have a weak arm. I know not to embarrass myself," Lucas told her matter-of-factly; Billy snorted.

"I don't need my boyfriend to win me an overpriced stuffed animal anyway, I'm a feminist," Max announced.

Lucas gave her the side-eye. "Right. Since when?"

Billy hit Steve on the shoulder, startling him a little. "Yo, gimme a smoke, man."

"Oh. Sure." Steve dug around in his jeans and pulled his pack of cigarettes out again. He held it out to Bill, who just stared at him. "Uh, what?"

Billy looked at him some more, raising his eyebrows expectantly; he was too much. "Oh, my god. Really?" Steve said. Bill made him feel totally dumb. He put the cigarette in Billy's mouth and then lit it for him. "Happy?"

“Yeah.”

“Wow. Nice, really subtle,” Lucas said dryly. Billy grinned at him and billowed smoke out of his nose like a dragon. Angela appeared too fascinated by Dustin and Mike being spectacularly bad at carnival games to notice Steve and Billy acting super gay with each other.

Eleven very obviously used her mind powers to send Mike's bean-bag soaring hard through the stack of tin cans. The bean-bag actually exploded, startling the attendant behind the counter.

“All right, kid,” he said (“Oh, *come on!*” Lucas cried indignantly, making Steve laugh).

“El!” Mike exclaimed all irritated. “You don't need to do that, I was going to get it!”

“Do what?”

Angela's eyes were bugged out behind her thick glasses. “I really feel like I'm missing something. You keep odd company,” she said to Bill, waving his cigarette smoke away. They watched as Eleven went up to pick her prize and the carnival worker handed over the hugest pink bear Steve had ever seen in his life; it nearly dwarfed her. “I do like that giraffe, though.”

“Yeah. The hippo's pretty cute,” commented Miss Feminist Max.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “I'm *not* spending all my money on this so that you can make fun of me, we have the movies next week.”

“I was just saying!”

Billy exchanged a look with Steve. “Think they're hinting, man.”

“Do you guys want stuffed animals?” Steve asked the girls. “Because we can totally get you stuffed animals.”

“Mm. I don't know,” Angela said thoughtfully. “Dustin's been annoying me all year, it's kind of satisfying to watch him be extremely awful at something.” Steve'd forgotten that they'd had some class together last year – lunch or study hall or something, he

thought.

Dustin badly missed another throw. “Oh, ha, ha, ha!”

Okay. It was too painful. “All right, I’m stepping in,” Steve said. He made a big display of rolling up his sleeves as he walked over to the booth; Max and Angela were laughing at him.

“Steve! I already paid for this shit, you can’t just take my bean-bags!” Dust bitched his head off as Steve pushed him aside, then made a throw and knocked over six cans right away. “Oh, my god, seriously? REBECCA, STOP ENCOURAGING HIM,” Dust commanded when she cheered and clapped for Steve.

“Whatever, that’s not even impressive! He’s like way stronger than us!” Mike was making his usual super-attractive face that made it look like he’d just drank a gallon of sour milk.

“You *do* know how pathetic that makes you sound, right?” Max asked him sweetly. Mike’s scowl deepened.

Bill finished his cigarette and put down a couple dollars. Five minutes later Angela had her giraffe and Max was happy and clutching a stuffed green hippo; they were working on getting Rebecca this ugly koala thing that she wanted.

Angela pooled the last of her money to give them. She had four bucks so Steve and Billy decided to see how much more shit they could win. Steve guessed if he couldn’t really get Billy a stuffed animal he could at least win one for each of the girls.

“This is so unfair, you’re making me look like a total asshole here,” Dust said. He didn’t seem too upset, leaning with his elbows propped up on the counter to watch Bill as he made his throw.

“Trust me, you don’t need anyone’s help to do that,” Angela told him; he grinned at her like a weirdo. “Hey, can I have a throw?”

“Yeah, your money.” Steve tossed her a bean-bag.

Between the three of them they managed to get two stuffed animals for each of the girls. Eleven held her giant bear happily while Mike –

consideringly less happy – carried her other prizes under his arms (another smaller pink bear and a weirdly droopy alligator). The earlier unease of the night seemed to have faded away and everyone was talking and laughing, watching as the lights from the rides slowly winked off. Most of the games had been shut down too and they were pretty much the only group left around, aside from a couple older couples walking back to their cars. Steve checked his wristwatch; it was eleven thirty-two.

Rebecca clapped a hand over her mouth. “Crap, my curfew’s in a half hour!”

“Yeah, mine too,” Angela told her. “I should have got going five minutes ago.”

Max looked extremely surprised. “You still have a curfew?”

Angela shrugged. “It’s really not that unreasonable,” she said. “I can stay out later if I call. Mom’s rules unless I want to start paying rent.”

Huh. Steve guessed he should feel lucky. He’d barely been home for half the summer, and all he got were a couple sarcastic notes on the fridge.

Billy headed off to walk Angela to her car and to bring Will and El back to their parents and suffer the wrath of Hopper. “Meet ya back here in five,” he told Steve and Max.

They watched them walk off, Eleven precariously cradling her bounty of stuffed animals. Will was chattering away up to Bill and Angela, who laughed at whatever he was saying.

Dust shook his head sadly as soon as they were out of earshot. “Hey, you know what, Will was the only one here without a date like usual.”

“Angela wasn’t with somebody,” Becca pointed out to him.

“Uh, she had Steve and Billy!”

“That doesn’t really count,” Max said (Steve didn’t think so, either). She looked thoughtful. “We should try to find Will an actual

boyfriend this year. There has to be someone.”

“Mm, I don't think that's a good idea,” Lucas told her doubtfully.

“Yeah, good luck, he's still super in love with Billy,” Dust said; Mike rolled his eyes and Steve made a face.

“What? You think so?”

“Gross, *no*. ” Mike was making a face too. “No way.”

“He won't really confirm or deny,” Lucas told Steve. “It's hard to get over your first crush, I guess.”

“Is it?” Max asked him.

“What? I wouldn't know,” Lucas said immediately, smooth as hell. “Seeing as you're the only girl I've ever liked and I am so lucky.”

“You sure are.” Max patted him on the cheek and turned to Rebecca. They started listing underclassmen boys to each other that Will could apparently potentially go out with or whatever. It didn't sound like the first time they'd had this conversation; Steve guessed they found it entertaining or something.

“I can't listen to this again, I'm going home,” Mike announced. He climbed up onto his bike and pedaled around the group in a slow circle. “Call me on Monday or whatever, if I'm still alive,” he told Lucas.

“Later, man.”

Max and Rebecca were ignoring Mike and continuing their gay conversation. “What about Eddy Guarcino, they were in AV Club together. He seems kinda queer,” Max said.

“No, please. Not that guy!” Lucas grimaced exaggeratedly.

Steve tried and failed not to make a huge face. He didn't know who the kid was, but he didn't think there was really a way to *seem queer* or whatever. That shit was totally stupid. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“What?” Max looked over at him, surprised.

“Do you actually know if he's, like, gay or whatever?”

“Well, no, but – ” she stopped abruptly, looking a little unsure all of a sudden. Steve guessed she hadn't been thinking of him listenin' to her going on.

“She just means he acts a certain way. You know, like really fruity,” Dust explained tactfully; Lucas made a face at him.

Right. “Okay,” Steve said doubtfully. “So do you think I act queer?” He was honestly curious. He didn't know what the kids said about him and Bill when he wasn't around.

“No!” Max said quickly. “I just – ”

“It's a *little* queer when you kiss your boyfriend,” Lucas said playfully. He sounded like he was teasing Steve which didn't really bother him.

“I didn't mean it like – bad or anything,” Max told him. She seemed embarrassed; maybe Steve was making too big of a deal out of it.

“We're just being dumb,” Rebecca added.

“No, I think Eddy's a viable option,” Dust said, sounding thoughtful. “I will do some research.”

Lucas looked at him like he'd grown two heads. “What the hell kinda research are you going to do?”

“Uh, yeah, I just think you guys should leave it up to Will if he's gonna go out with somebody or not,” Steve told them; Max looked at him with absolute derision.

Billy was stalking back over so Max and Becca shut up with their queer talk. Bill was holding Eleven's giant pink bear under one arm and looking pissed off; everyone fell silent and stared at him as he approached.

“Looks like you made a new friend,” Steve commented, grinning.

“Fuck off.”

“Um, why do you have that?” Lucas asked him.

Bill rolled his eyes. “Hop said there's too much girly shit at his place. He fuckin' paid me ten bucks to take it.” he said gruffly. Max busted up laughing at him.

Lucas looked absolutely thrilled. “Okay, more important question: how'd you get El to let you keep it?”

Bill looked even more pissed off; it was so good. It took him a couple seconds to answer. “Told her I really liked it.”

“Oh, my *god*, Billy!” Max said in euphoria.

“Fuck off,” Bill said again. He shoved the bear into her arms. “Whatever, it's yours now.”

Max clutched the bear happily (it was nearly as tall as her, really) as they started walking across the field towards the clusters of parked cars. “Nope. He's *definitely* yours.”

“Man, I don't want that shit.”

They headed back to Bill's car first since it was the closest; Steve and Billy stood under a streetlight and shared a cigarette while the kids yelled and messed around. Max and Dustin and Lucas were laughing hysterically and trying to buckle the giant bear into the backseat of the Camaro as Rebecca stood around, looking tense and fretting about her curfew. “NO, WAIT, DON'T SQUISH HIS HEAD!” Max hollered like a banshee. They'd all definitely had too much sugar.

“Dude, I'm not going to be able to fit back here with this thing!” Lucas exclaimed all hyper; the kids all shrieked with laughter again.

Billy rolled his eyes, handing the cig back over to Steve. “Fucking annoying fucks.”

“I can't believe you kept that thing.”

“Yeah, well, Hopper tells you to do something, you can't exactly say

no.” Steve guessed that was true. Well, Billy needed more decorations at his apartment, anyway (Steve decided not to say this). “Think he’s punishing me for bringing the kid back late.” Bill would think a giant stuffed animal was punishment.

They couldn’t really hang out on their own – Steve had to get Rebecca back to her house before her parents quartered and killed her. He hoped they wouldn’t think she and Dust were out being deviants and taking apart more electronics or whatever.

He felt a little let down saying goodbye. It had actually been a pretty fun time – no one had died or been injured or kidnapped, which was always a plus – but he and Billy hadn’t really gotten to be alone at all. Lately at the end of a night with Bill, Steve got kisses and usually sex.

They were standing out on a main road right now, though; they couldn’t really do either of those things, even though it was late. He wondered if Billy wanted to touch him too. “Do you wanna, like, meet up again, or ... ?”

Billy made a face, looking regretful. “Yeah, think I should actually go home, I gotta go study and shit. Got my first test tomorrow.”

“Oh, right. Okay,” Steve said, surprised – he’d been over at Billy’s a lot this week and Bill definitely hadn’t mentioned studying for class or needing to study. He hoped he wasn’t, like, monopolizing Bill’s time or whatever. “You didn’t have to come out tonight, we coulda gone some other day.”

“It’s cool, man. It’s like a practice cert anyway, it don’t even really count. I just wanna look over a couple things. You could still come over,” Billy added, eyes flicking up to meet Steve’s.

Damn. Steve hesitated – he should really let Billy study and do his stuff for school, though. “No, it’s okay. Call me tomorrow, let me know how you did.” Over Bill’s shoulder, Rebecca was looking increasingly stressed out by the car, making Steve want to laugh a little. “Okay, I guess we need to go,” he said, a little louder.

“Yeah, all right. Thanks for takin’ me out,” Bill told him, reaching out to touch Steve’s shoulder for a long moment. “I’ll call ya.” He turned

away, then roared abruptly, “HENDERSON, GET MY FUCKING SUNGLASSES OFF THAT THING.”

They split ways, with Steve and Dustin and Becca walking off to the sounds of Bill yelling threats at Max and Lucas. Steve drove the kids home, turning right on Broad to drop Rebecca home first. By the time he took Dustin all the way out to his house and got back into town, it was close to one in the morning.

If his mom had come home, she wasn't here now — Steve let the dogs in and out again, then went around the empty house, checking things out and making sure the doors were locked. He went up to his room, intending to watch TV or play a record, then crashed out in two seconds.

He woke up groggily sometime late in the morning to the phone beside his bed ringing. A glance at his wristwatch told him it was nearly noon; he'd slept hard for once. Yesterday had actually been a really long day, he guessed.

He swept his arm out for the phone and nearly fell off the bed. “Hello?” he said, trying not to sound like he'd just woke up. He felt a little fuzzy or startled or something, like whenever you had to get up suddenly. Hopefully nothing was wrong.

“Hey, what's up? Jes-sus, you still sleeping? I just tried to call you two times,” a familiar voice said; it took Steve a couple seconds to realize it was Alex. “Oh, dude, I have crazy shit to tell you!”

Steve muffled a yawn into his shirt-sleeve and flopped back down on his bed. “Yeah, sorry. I was out kinda late last night.”

“I figured, you missed hockey. Mark told me he saw you hanging out at the carnival with that Henderson kid and Angela Davis! Thanks for inviting me, by the way.”

Oh. Shit. Steve winced at the phone. “Ah, sorry, man. We can go this week if you want, I wasn't — ”

“Yeah, yeah, yeahyeahyeah,” Alex interrupted him. “No, it's fine, I

don't care. God, Angela is so hot, though," he said with longing; Steve felt disturbed.

"Seriously?"

"What? I love a mean girl in glasses. You know this," Alex said. "She could step all over my dick, punch me and shit."

Alex really needed help, Steve had always known it. He thought about last night at the carnival. "Yeah, she's actually not that terrible, really."

"Don't disappoint me," Alex told him sternly. The line fuzzed over for a second. "Aw, shit, man – I think I'm about to get disconnected, I only put like twenty cents in."

"What did you wanna tell me?"

"What? Oh, yeah! Right. Okay, so I was just in the Kroger's, right? Oh, whatever, and everybody was, like, bitching at me, they were like, *uh, just go to the convenience store, what the fuck*, but they don't have the blue Gatorade at the place on Broad Street, you know? Whatever, it's like a five minute walk. Assholes." Alex talked and talked; they were gonna get cut off before he got to say whatever the hell it was he wanted to say.

"Sure, man," Steve said loudly, interrupting him a little. "So, so what happened?"

"I'm getting to it, I was building up the, the setting or whatever. Okay, this was so amazing, you're not going to believe this," Alex chattered on. "So I was just in the express check-out with my Skittles and my drink and shit, right? Minding my own business. This was, like, I guess twenty minutes ago, it was about eleven-thirty. Oh, my god, okay, I gotta tell you."

All right. Everybody always bitched and complained that Steve talked too much, but that was because they hadn't been friends with Alex since the fifth grade.

Damn, Steve was too awake now – he probably wasn't gonna be able to fall back asleep. "Man, I'm tired. Think you can get to the point

before tomorrow?”

“Fuck you,” Alex said with ease. He started laughing into the phone too much (Steve waited patiently, rolling his eyes at the ceiling and switching the receiver to his other ear). “Okay, so, so Nancy Wheeler, you know, your lost love, she walks in with her mom looking like she's on a spy mission or some shit. I swear to god she looked like she wanted to die when she saw me. HER HAIR WAS FUCKING GREEN, STEVE!” he screamed happily; Steve started laughing.

Saturday and Sunday passed too quickly like always and the next week was weirdly hectic. On Monday Steve had to stay late at work and then the next night Bill had to stay late at *his* job. Wednesday Steve's mom needed to get new tires on her car so Steve spent two very long days driving her around being nagged at and scrutinized, then practically the whole week had gone by.

Bill had to go and eat dinner with Max and Susan on Friday night and he'd called earlier to tell Steve that he'd probably be stuck there until late. Steve was trying not to feel disappointed; they hadn't been together since early on Sunday, almost a whole week. It was probably one of the longest times they hadn't seen each other since – damn, since Bill had been in the hospital. But he understood why Billy would maybe wanna be around his family right now. It wasn't like he and Billy had to see each other every day, even though that was nice.

Saturday morning was cold and overcast; Steve got up and met with Alex and some of the other guys in town to play hockey like usual. Everybody was going back to school soon and it seemed like it was probably the last weekend they'd get to play.

At home, he even managed to make it to past four o'clock before he called Bill. He got the answering machine but then Billy picked up before the tape could beep. “Hey, are we still on for later?”

“Yeah, if you wanna come over.”

“So how was your mom's? Stepmom's,” Steve corrected himself quickly. He was Good Boyfriend Steve and could ask about important

things.

"It was fine. Got somethin' I wanna show you," Bill told him, vague as always.

"Uhhh. Okay," Steve said, trying not to feel scared. He didn't know what Billy could have found at his old house that he wanted to show Steve; maybe some old coke or something crazy (did shit like that expire?). Billy didn't elaborate so after a moment Steve went on. "So do you wanna go somewhere? We could do the drive-in again or go out to the city." It would be nice to go somewhere with Bill and just be together, Steve thought. He was also willing to do mini-golf.

Billy didn't answer him for a couple of seconds. "Kinda thought we could just hang out at my place tonight."

"Oh, sure. Okay." He sounded kind of weird, maybe, and Steve wasn't sure why – probably he'd just had a long week too. Hopefully Bill wasn't getting sick of him or something. It was a dumb thing but Steve always felt a little funny when they hadn't really talked for a couple days, like maybe something had changed and he wasn't aware of it yet. It was something he was trying to work on. "What did you wanna do?"

"Dunno. We can just watch a movie if you want."

"Do you want me to bring you food or anything?"

"No. That's okay. Hey, I'll make ya dinner," Billy told him.

"Really?"

"Yeah, whatdya want?"

Steve felt a little suspicious. "Uh, well, I dunno." Obviously Billy had made him food before, but it had always been more like the kinda thing where he'd already cooking something and Steve had been around. It wasn't as if he'd ever made big plans to make Steve dinner. Mostly he just cooked breakfast in ten minutes and bitched at Steve that he took way too long to get ready in the morning. "What, you're really gonna cook for me?"

“I just said.”

Hmm. “What's the catch?” Steve asked him, still suspicious.

“Look, Harrington, I'm not gonna fuckin' do it if you're gonna make a big shit out of things,” Bill said all grouchy.

Okay, there was Steve's guy. Steve was in a good mood and he was going to see Billy soon; he was trying not to smile. He guessed it didn't matter if he smiled or not. Billy couldn't see him and get more annoyed. “All right, I'm sorry. I was just asking.”

“So whatdya want?”

“Oh. I don't know.” He had to think about it. “Can you make me that chicken thing again?”

“What thing?”

“That, like, the thing you guys made before Max went to see her dad. Like last month I guess.”

“Uh.” Billy was quiet for a moment. Steve could picture him in the kitchen in his apartment, holdin' the phone and leaning over the counter or playing with the rings on his hand. “Yeah, okay. I'd have to get her over here for the recipe.”

“Oh, yeah, no, you don't have to do all – ”

“It's fine,” Bill interrupted him. “What else you want?”

“What?”

“To eat,” Billy said patiently.

“Uh, potatoes?” That was always a safe bet. Aside from when Steve made them; apparently you could over-cook those things. Dumb.

“What else?”

“What else?” Steve repeated. “Isn't that enough?”

“No. You need a vegetable.”

“Potato's a vegetable,” Steve pointed out, not for the first time. They always had really deep conversations, he thought. He didn't really know what to say or ask for. Nobody had really cooked him dinner aside from like his mom.

“No it's n – you need three things on your plate.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, that's what elevates it to, like, an actual fuckin' meal,” Bill told him. He was funny; he sounded really insistent.

Steve was smiling again. “I don't know, surprise me.”

“Fine.”

“Do you need me to bring anything?”

“I don't care.” He was being especially gruff for somebody who wanted to cook Steve dinner. “Yeah, I guess you can rent me a movie or whatever.”

“Okay, what you wanna watch?”

“You can pick.”

Steve felt highly suspicious again. Making dinner was one thing, but Billy almost *never* let him pick the movie. It wasn't really a thing he minded, but he just never ended up picking the movie. “Really?”

“Yeah, just get whatever.”

“Uh, okay. You're not gonna bitch for eight minutes about what I get?”

“Man, why are you acting like I'm gonna fucking murder you or something?” Billy asked him. “I ain't seen you for like six days, pick a tape and let me make you dinner.”

All right. Steve was pretty sure that he being kind of rude or difficult. He'd been waiting to see Billy all week – maybe it wasn't out of the realm of possibility to think that Bill wanted to spend time with him

too. Normal couples did dinner and a movie and it wasn't a big deal. "Okay. Well, thank you."

Billy ignored him saying thanks. "What time you gonna come over?"

"Oh. You know. Whenever you want me, really," Steve said, as suggestively as possible. It *had* been six days after all. They were probably gonna hook up again; Steve was looking forward to it. Hopefully there would be blowjobs.

Bill was apparently not seduced. "What, so like eight?" he said all gruff, totally missing Steve's cue.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Uh, yeah, that's fine."

"All right, guess I'll see ya."

"Do you want me to – "

"Bye," Bill said shortly and hung up on him.

Steve blinked and held the phone for another moment. He was so used to Billy being abrupt with him that it wasn't even really annoying anymore – okay, maybe a little. Anyway, he guessed he had a dinner date now.

He still had a good amount of time before he had to meet Billy; he cleaned the house up a little and took his clothes out of the dryer so that Mom wouldn't yell at him later. He wasted an hour in the backyard, throwing the Frisbee for Luke and Leia to tire them out since he probably wouldn't be around later. Then Alex called him to talk about nothing for forever and then Dustin called him to talk about nothing for another twenty minutes. Apparently Steve was popular today.

He spent a while showering and getting ready, picking his clothes out and doing his hair and all that shit. He'd slept with his contacts in on Thursday so his eyes were still bugging him; he slid his glasses on

reluctantly for the final touch.

Billy had said a couple times that Steve always looked good – first of all, that was crazy because nobody always looked good. But secondly, he probably didn't realize just how much effort Steve usually put into his appearance (it wasn't a crime to want to look good for the guy you liked, okay?). Anyway, he guessed that Bill was used to the glasses by now.

Somehow Steve misjudged the time anyway; once he drove himself to the video store it was nearly eight o'clock. Out by the mall in Loch Nora, they'd gotten one of those new Blockbuster stores, but Hawkins still just had the Family Video at the end of Main Street, across from the comic book shop and the arcade.

He tried to choose a movie that Bill wouldn't totally hate even though he'd said to just get whatever. The Family Vid was okay but it didn't exactly have the biggest selection of choices: they got about five new films every couple months. Finally he picked out *Highlander* which had come out earlier last year. The previews had looked okay and he was pretty sure it was something that both he and Bill hadn't seen yet. You couldn't complain about an action movie, Steve figured.

It was only a quarter-past when he reached Billy's apartment complex and headed up the stairs to the second floor – not too late. Steve hesitated for a moment and decided to knock. Billy had given him that key before and everything, but it still felt kinda rude to just walk in.

Bill let him in after a moment and then closed the door behind them. He was smiling and he looked happy to see Steve; that felt really nice. “Hey, man.”

“Hey.” Steve pressed him against the doorframe and kissed him. It had been six days after all – they didn't even need to eat dinner, actually.

Billy let Steve kiss him for a moment and then pushed him back. He laughed a little like he was embarrassed or something. “Come on, stop.”

Hmm. No fun. Steve was about to ask why he needed to stop when he realized that of course they weren't alone. Max was standing over in the kitchenette, leaning with her elbows on the counter and watching them with a speculative look on her face; Steve hadn't even noticed her. "Oh. Hey, Max." He remembered last week and briefly wondered if he was acting *too queer* for her.

"Yeah, hi." She just rolled her eyes, looking extremely amused by him.

"Are you, ah, hangin' out here for long?" Steve asked, trying not to sound disappointed. It wasn't like he minded Max being around usually – he should feel lucky that Lucas or Dustin weren't around too. But it was Saturday night and he wanted to be alone with Billy. He wasn't like a saint or something.

"Nope," Bill answered for her right away.

Max rolled her eyes again; she was smiling though. "Don't worry, I was just leaving. I've got plans with Bev." She rounded the counter and veered off into the living room, plucking her backpack up from the couch – another thing Steve hadn't noticed was there. He probably needed, like, some situational awareness skills or something.

He moved to the side to let her go out the door. Max paused and looked over at Billy. "You still wanna get breakfast tomorrow?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"Okay. What time?" Bill ignored her; he was touching Steve's shirt collar. "Billy! God, can you wait?"

Billy made a really terrible face. "Fuck you."

"Hello? What time?"

"I don't care. Like ten, okay?"

Max looked really doubtful. "Are you actually gonna get up that early?"

“Jesus. I just said.”

“Okay, okay. I'm leaving, all right?” She swept her hair back over her shoulder and put her hand on the doorknob. “Good luck,” she said all secretive (Steve tried not to feel scared again).

Billy made another face. “Oh my god. Fuck *off*, ” he said like he was in pain; Max laughed at him.

“Enjoy your dinner,” she said in a goofy voice, then screamed and ducked out the door when Bill tried to slug her.

Max left and finally they were alone. Bill pawed at him for a moment and then took the plastic bag out of Steve's hand. “What movie you get?” He pulled *Highlander* out and wrinkled his nose up, lookin' cute. “All right. Guess I can deal with that.”

“Alex said before that it was good,” Steve informed him, then realized that that might not exactly be a ringing endorsement.

Billy looked like Steve was being really funny. “Oh, well. If Alex said.”

“Whatever.”

“You wanna eat yet?”

“Yeah, definitely.” Steve was prepared for dinner even though he wanted to hook up more; he hadn't even let himself have second lunch. He took a moment to look around as Bill walked into the kitchen and dropped the tape onto the counter. Billy must have cleaned the apartment again since Sunday: the bookshelf was moved to the opposite wall and it made it look like there was more space somehow. You could tell the floor had been vacuumed and there was a new potted plant by the door.

“Lookin' for something?” Bill asked him.

“No. Just checking the place out.” Steve wasn't gonna say anything but he found it a little cute or funny that Billy was actually way neater than he was. You wouldn't think it but maybe it made sense. “Hey, where's that bear thing?”

Billy shrugged and made another awful face. "In Max's room. Shit gives me the creeps."

"Why? It's a stuffed animal."

"Yeah, wait til you wake up and it's on the fuckin' radiator staring at you." Steve guessed that Max had had a lot of fun this week.

Most of the dishes were already cleaned up and put away so Steve couldn't even really help out much. Bill had made him a plate; Steve sat down at the little table while Billy moved around, thinking stuff down into the sink. "I can do that if you want."

"Don't worry about it."

The food was good: Max and Billy were definitely better cooks than him. The chicken tasted like it was grilled even though it wasn't actually grilled and it had melted cheese and onions on it (also, the potatoes were not over-mashed). "How much of this did you actually make?" Steve asked him, genuinely curious.

"Fuck you, I did all of it. She was just, like. Supervising me and buggin' me and shit."

"Okay." He was a little impressed. "So is this, like, an actual recipe, or did you guys come up with it?"

"I dunno." Billy was standing leaned with his back up against the counter with his plate; he seemed kind of weird or jittery for some reason. "Uh, when – yeah, when my dad started seein' Susan, he'd take her out to all these fancy restaurants and shit. Me and Max got to go like two times. They had some shit like this there, she's been tryin' to recreate it for like five years."

"Where'd you guys go?"

"Dunno. Like Friday's or some shit."

Wow. Okay. Steve tried with all his might not to make a comment about Bill and Max thinking that a *TGI Friday's* was a fancy restaurant. He didn't want to seem like some bougie asshole. "Oh, yeah. It's good."

"I guess." Billy wasn't really eating much. He was mostly standing and looking at Steve and it felt weird, like a first date or something. Steve didn't mind being looked at but Billy was acting super funny; he wasn't even sitting at the table.

"Uh. What are you doin'?" Steve asked him after a couple minutes.

"What?"

"You're just starin' at me and, like, being weird."

"No I ain't." Bill looked even weirder. "What, we're fucking eating dinner."

"Okay." He waited for a beat; Billy continued staring at him. "Are you gonna sit down?"

"Oh. Yeah." Bill sat down across from him at the table and continued being weird. Finally Steve got him talking about work and school and stuff and he seemed to relax a little.

"Did you get your paper back?"

Bill's forked scraped on the plate and he stared down at his food. "My what?" he said, all loud for some reason.

"Your – uh. Your thing from class? You said you had a test last week, did you get it back?"

"Yeah. I did okay." Steve looked at him expectantly so Billy had to say more stuff. "It's fail or pass, 's like a practice test. I passed."

"Oh, okay. That's great, Bill."

"Yeah." He scraped his fork some more. "I, uh – you want a beer or somethin'?"

"Sure."

Billy had Rolling Rock in his fridge – he took two out, one for himself and one for Steve. They drank their beers and ate dinner and then Steve helped Billy put the rest of the dishes away.

Billy seemed nervous for some reason and he was never nervous; it was super weird. He was all tense or something, not how he'd normally be acting when they were by themselves. It was making Steve feel weird, too, like there was more he should be doing or saying. He couldn't tell if Bill was actually upset over anything or not. Maybe some shit had finally happened with his dad or something and he didn't wanna say.

They were standing close together by the counter so Steve reached out and put his hand on the back of Billy's neck. "Hey, you all right?"

Bill almost dropped the plate he was holding (super weird). "Uh. Yeah." He cleared his throat, then put the plate away and closed up the dishwasher. "I'm good."

"Okay," Steve said doubtfully. He debated with himself and then decided to pry a little. "So did you hear from your dad or anything this week?"

Billy shrugged and his whole demeanor changed. He pulled away a little and started to frown, looking puzzled. "No. Why would I?"

"I dunno, I was just asking."

"For what? Why, you think he's gonna call me up, say sorry?"

Okay. Probably a bad topic to bring up, after all. "Uh, I guess not. I just wanted to know how you're –"

"I haven't talked to him in almost three weeks, man. Be good to keep it that way." Bill didn't sound mad exactly, but there was an edge to his voice. "You gonna ask me about it every time we hang out?"

"No, sorry. I just care about you." He felt a little silly saying it but it was true.

Billy made a really awful face over being cared about. "I guess," he managed to grunt out like it was painful.

"I know, it's so terrible, right?" Steve said, teasing him. Billy smiled at him so Steve guessed they were still okay.

He knew that Billy didn't really want to talk about his dad and that was fine. Steve just wanted to have a normal night where they didn't talk about bad shit or have any kids to babysit so maybe he shouldn't have even brought it up. It was just that he had so many things he wanted to know, though: like if Bill's stepmom was actually going to divorce Mr. Hargrove, or if she really planned to take him to court. When all that was gonna happen, and if Bill was going to have to be a part of it.

He didn't wanna ruin the night by asking Billy a bunch of stuff that he didn't have answers to. He knew it wasn't his business or anything, but he did care about Billy – and about Max, too – so he needed updates. Daily ones, preferably, so he didn't have to worry.

“You wanna watch the movie?” Bill asked him suddenly.

Okay. “Sure,” Steve said slowly. He guessed that topic was closed. Steve knew that asking a bunch of questions was just gonna make get all Billy annoyed, and then not tell him anything anyway. He'd seemed to want Steve to come over and all so Steve was pretty sure he hadn't done anything.

He went and sat down on the couch while Billy put the tape into the VCR and got them more beers. “Got my mail and shit from Sue's place last night,” Bill told him, nodding over at the couch.

“Oh, yeah? Anything good?”

“Dunno. Check it out.”

There was a stack of mail and some papers and a fancy yearbook on the couch cushion beside Steve; it was one of the hardcover ones which was more expensive. It had Billy's name on the front in small gold lettering. “Oh, cool!” Steve said like a little geek before he could stop himself. He set his beer aside, then picked the book up and looked at it. “I didn't know you ordered a yearbook.”

“Me neither. Guess Susan paid for it.” Bill flopped down on the smaller couch across from Steve and lounged with his drink.

“Wow. That was nice of her. Can I look at it?”

“Yeah, I don't care.”

Steve flipped through the yearbook, looking for Bill's senior portrait. The senior pictures were a little bigger than the regular student photos and they made you stand outside and pose and all that. Billy looked cool and pissed off leaning against the brick wall by the back of the school; he had that dumb skeleton hoodie on that he'd worn for like all winter of last year.

Steve kinda wished he had a photo of him. It'd be too big to put in his wallet or whatever though. “Hey, you look badass.”

“Whatever.” Billy rolled his eyes.

Steve kept looking through the book. Damn, Nancy's hair was really huge; Angela Davis looked super different without her glasses on (Steve remembered Alex saying that Angela could stomp on his dick or whatever and shuddered internally). Will and Lucas were clowning on the page for the AV Club with a couple other kids, doing that nerdy Spock thing with their hands. Mike stood in the background, making a face. Steve was pretty sure he was eating a pudding cup. “Oh my god, did you look at this shit?”

“I ain't really gone through it yet. Max was hogging it last night.”

“Figures.” He flipped back to find her picture too.

Billy was staring at him again when Steve looked up. He was wearing this dark blue button-up shirt that Steve somehow hadn't seen him wear before; it made his eyes look really blue. “That all you gonna look at?”

“Uh. I mean.” Steve wasn't really sure what he meant. “I don't wanna go through your mail.”

“It don't matter. Got my research paper back,” Bill told him all casual.

Oh. Shit. Steve felt really silly, a little embarrassed actually. That had been a long time ago but they'd kind of made it, like, a thing. It had been back when he and Bill had first started hooking up and were kinda-sorta together and not really talking about it. He was pretty

sure he'd choked Billy a little and jerked him off and had told him that he'd do whatever Billy wanted if he could get an A on his paper. Steve almost couldn't believe he'd actually done all that; being around Billy made him do really crazy shit. Their relationship was different now, though. "Oh, yeah?" he said, also super casual. "They mailed it to you?"

"Guess so."

Steve set the yearbook aside and picked up the stack of papers. Bill's essay was right there on top. His handwriting was way better than Steve's and he'd even titled it and everything. The teacher had written his grade up by his name and circled it twice: 96. That wasn't just an A but an A+, actually. Pretty incredible. Steve didn't think he'd gotten an A on an English paper since he'd been in elementary school.

"Wow, Bill, that's, that's really great. Damn. Hey, I'm proud of you." Steve had had to do a research paper too last year, even though he'd just been in dumbo remedial English. He'd gotten a straight 70 and had just been glad his teacher hadn't written a million comments on it. Billy was so smart with that stuff, not like Steve at all; Steve had known he could get a perfect grade if he tried just a little bit.

"Thanks."

"Uh," Steve said. He thumbed the side of his mouth, thinking. "So do you, uh ... remember what we talked about?" He felt dumb after he'd said it; of course Billy remembered if he was the one bringing the paper up.

"Yeah."

He was giving Steve a lot to work with. "Okay. Did you decide what you want?"

"Sure did," Bill said. He watched and waited until Steve had picked up his beer bottle again and raised it to his lips. "I want you to fuck me."

Steve choked on his beer and spilled some of it down his shirt. The

back of his throat burned like crazy; Billy stared patiently as Steve coughed and sputtered for about twenty seconds.

Finally he was able to breathe again. "I – you – sorry, what?"

"Think you heard me."

"Uhhhh," Steve managed, real sexy-like. Holy shit. Okay. He wasn't really sure what he'd been expecting Billy to ask for, but it definitely hadn't been that. That was ... a lot. "Okay, I – yeah, are you, like, serious?"

Billy rolled his eyes and looked annoyed. As usual, he was a loving and comforting presence. "Yeah, that's why I said it." He added, almost unsure, "You said you'd do what I want."

"Okay. Okay." Steve really wished he could manage to say more than 'okay;' he knew more words than that. His brain had kind of stopped working after Bill had said *fuck me* though. "I mean, I know I did. I – uh, so you want – " Shit. *Talk normal*, he told himself. "Wait, is this, do you just want to have sex because of the paper?"

"What? No." Bill's eyebrows went down like Steve had said something shitty to him. "I was – I just thought we should. Like. I mean, I thought you'd wanna."

"Oh," Steve said brilliantly. "Right. Yeah, okay. Uh, sure." It was a lot to process. Billy had said *fuck me* which implied that he wanted Steve to be the one to – yeah. Okay. That was fine but it was, wow, a lot. Steve wasn't sure if he was going to be any good or anything, or if Billy even would like it. They hadn't really ever –

"Do you not want to?" Bill asked him. He was still just sitting across from Steve on the couch and he looked weird and nervous; Steve didn't want him to look that way when it was just the two of them.

"What? No, yeah," Steve said right away. "I mean, yeah, of course I do."

"Okay."

"I just, ah. I, I don't know. We never really ... talked about it."

"I'm trying to talk about it."

"Sure, I get that." Steve wasn't really sure what he was supposed to say. It was so hard sometimes to talk to Billy about stuff; apparently talking about sex was even harder. "So do you –"

"I just," Bill said at the same time, kind of interrupting him; Steve stopped. Billy switched his beer to his other hand and rubbed the side of his jaw. "Sorry. Sorry, I ain't, uh – good at this shit. I was trying to –" He made a face, kind of wincing. "I wanted shit to be, you know. I was trying to be, uh ... like, romantic or whatever."

Oh. Steve stared at him. He suddenly realized why Billy had been so acting fucking weird and jumpy all night. He felt majorly dumb – Bill had cooked him that nice dinner and everything. Steve was pretty sure he even had a new shirt on. Holy shit. "You – yeah, no, it is."

"Right." Bill cast a glance over at him, looking really skeptical.

"And I mean, we, uh, can do that if you want," Steve told him. It wasn't like he *didn't* want to have sex with Billy. Obviously he did; it was something he thought about pretty frequently.

"Yeah?"

"Sure." It was just, well, a lot to take in. He'd really thought they were just gonna hang out tonight or watch a movie, their normal stuff. It was kind of a lot of pressure, all of a sudden. "So I just – yeah, just to, uh, be clear – when you say, like, *fuck*, ah. You want me to be the one to ... " Steve trailed off, unsure. There wasn't really a proper way to say *put my dick up your ass* without sounding super crass. He was pretty sure he was blushing which wasn't an attractive look for him. "Uh. Do that ... to you? You know. The, the fucking part," he added for clarification.

"Uh. Yeah." Billy shifted on the couch across from him, looking really uncomfortable again. "Is that okay?"

Hahahaha. Was that okay. Billy was asking if Steve wanted to have sex with him and if that was okay. Steve felt a little crazy. "Uh, sure. Yes. I mean, yeah, I can do that." In theory, at least. Holy shit. Okay.

“Okay. Well, I bought condoms,” Bill told him; Steve stared again.

“You bought ... “ he repeated blankly. “Uh, why?”

“I don't know!” Now Billy looked all irritated by him; that was familiar but not exactly great right now since they were talking about fucking each other. “I thought you'd want – I, I dunno, it's what you're supposed to do, man. So we'd, like, have shit ready, I guess.”

“Oh. Okay,” Steve said. Safe sex and all that, he guessed. He wasn't really sure why that they needed condoms; it wasn't like he or Bill were sleeping around or had been with tons of people. “Uh, okay. So you – wait, did you do all this last night?”

“No, I didn't just – fuckin' decide last night.” Billy looked even more irritated by him. “I had, I dunno, I had 'em for a while. Like a couple weeks or whatever.”

Steve stared back at him, unable to answer for a moment. He was starting to feel really overwhelmed – the thought of Billy actually, like, planning shit and going out and buying condoms made him feel kind of nuts. Maybe Bill had been sitting there thinking about Steve fucking him last week when Steve had been being a little oblivious dork talking about the carnival. It was just really crazy; it almost didn't seem like Billy. “Um. Right. Where are they?” he asked inanely.

Bill looked at him like he was totally nuts. “In my ... in my room?” he said like it was a question.

“Oh.” Right. That was a normal place to have condoms. For when you were going to have sex with someone. Which they were about to do. Steve was pretty sure he was making things extremely awkward; he might be freaking out. “Uh, okay.”

He didn't know what to say again. This weird silence stretched out between them; Bill looked like he was in actual pain or something. “So do you wanna do it or not?”

“I – sure!” Steve said loudly. Okay. He was definitely freaking out, actually. Bill wanted him to put a condom on and fuck him. “What, I

– you mean, like, tonight?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay.” Right. Steve felt really overwhelmed again, a little crazy. He stood up abruptly and held his beer bottle. “Do you want – like – what, like right now?”

Billy's eyes were really big. “Jesus Christ.” He moved forward on the couch as if to grab at Steve or something. “No, I – calm down, sit the fuck down, man.”

“Oh. Sorry.” So not *right* right now, apparently. Steve was a total idiot; he didn't know what the hell he was supposed to be doing. He made himself sit down, feeling silly.

“Jesus,” Billy said again. “I don't – uh, we could like. I, I dunno. Watch the movie first. See what happens, I guess.”

Okay. Right. Dinner and then a movie and then sex, that was how it was supposed to go. “Okay. Sure.” Steve tried to get himself under control. He looked over at Billy again; he felt weirdly far away. “Uh, could you maybe, like, come over here?” he asked, trying to calm down.

“Oh. Yeah, okay.” Billy stood up and moved to come and sit by Steve. They had to gather up the yearbook and all the papers and and shuffle them between each other. It was weird with no coffee table in the room; eventually Steve handed them over and then Bill put them on the floor. He seemed super stiff and uncomfortable, almost like he didn't know what to do with himself, so Steve sat back and stretched an arm around him over the back of the couch. “Sorry,” Bill said again, not exactly relaxing.

Steve didn't really think he had anything to apologize for. Everything felt really weird and awkward right now, but it wasn't Bill's fault that Steve was totally freaking out. “Uh, no, we're good,” he said.

“I dunno what to – sorry, I made shit weird.”

“No, it's, it's not weird,” Steve said quickly. Okay, it was a little weird. He thought again that it was so difficult to talk about sex; it

must have been even harder for Billy to actually ask for it. "I just wasn't sure if that was ... uh, something you'd be into."

Billy stared at the blue screen of the TV for a moment and then looked over at him. "I mean, yeah." He laughed abruptly and turned back to the TV again, swiping his hair away from his face. "What, you couldn't tell?"

"Oh. I don't know," Steve said, honestly surprised. There were certain sexy things that he and Billy did together, he guessed, and that he liked to do to Billy, but they just never really talked about it when they weren't doing it. They'd done a lot of things but not *that*, actual sex or fucking or whatever. Penetration. God, that was actually kind of a weird word. Did it count if it was just fingers so far? "I didn't want to assume anything."

Billy rolled his eyes. "Shut the fuck up." He made Steve laugh and things almost felt normal for a moment.

"You – wanna just watch the movie?" he suggested.

"Oh. Yeah." Bill handed over the remote and Steve pressed the button to turn the VCR on.

They got through the previews and then Billy stood up again to turn the lights off in the kitchen and to get them more beers. When he sat down again he moved a little closer to Steve so Steve was able to put his arm around him again without it feeling as strained and awkward.

Steve couldn't really focus on the movie; he had other things on his mind. Bill had said *See what happens* but obviously they were going to do it. How was he supposed to focus on the movie when apparently he was going to be fucking Billy in about two hours. Ninety minutes. How long was the movie, anyway?

It was just a pretty big deal, was all. Steve had thought about having actual sex with Billy tons of times: what it would be like (great), how it would feel (awesome). The places they could do it in (pretty much anywhere, as long as Max wasn't around). It was one of his favorite things to think about, actually, like when he was having his Steve-

thoughts late at night and he was by himself.

He guessed the thing was that he hadn't ever actually envisioned the first time or anything. Like, the mechanics of it and all that. They'd fooled around dozens of times – hell, maybe even hundreds – and Steve was pretty sure that they'd gotten really close to doing it on a few occasions. But they'd never actually gone that far, like to the point where they were actually fucking or whatever. Fooling around was one thing but you couldn't just put your dick in somebody without asking or talking about it first.

They really *hadn't* talked about it, not in any real way, and it all seemed a little, like – scary or something right now. He could tell that Bill was super nervous and that made Steve feel kind of nervous, too. Billy seemed to think that just because Steve had watched one stupid porno four years ago that he actually knew what he was doing. As usual he thought way too much of Steve because Steve had no clue about sexy stuff like that at all, not when it came to being with a dude. He could daydream all he wanted but he didn't know how it would actually go. There was this little part of him that wasn't even totally sure if two guys could have sex like that for real and have it be, you know, good. It was just a lot of unknown territory.

They watched the movie and Steve tried not to freak out. They kept being too awkward with each other; it was totally dumb. Every time Billy would brush up against Steve Steve would move away to make more room for him and then he'd said 'Sorry' or Bill would say 'sorry' and they were being totally dumb. Billy asked again Steve if he wanted another beer and Steve said sure. Then Steve asked him if he had anything stronger and Bill said sure and got the whiskey out too.

After a few minutes Steve felt a little better, less nervous or whatever. Maybe he shouldn't be freaking out at all: this was what he'd wanted and had thought about for so long, being with Billy like this. He did another shot and then kind of regretted it – there was a part of him that didn't really want to be drunk for the first time they were going to sleep with each other. Then again it wasn't like he and Billy never drank together. It was supposed to be a normal night, he figured. Yep.

Apparently Steve had somehow unknowingly picked the longest

movie ever made. It was kind of like torture, really. The soundtrack was super loud and he didn't know what the hell was going on or exactly who the Highlander was or why there could be only one. He was pretty sure he'd missed a huge chunk of the movie being awkward and accidentally elbowing Billy eight times. His dick had also been half-hard for about twenty minutes and they weren't even doing anything yet. Anticipation he guessed.

"Okay," Steve said finally, a little too loud; Bill turned his head and looked at him. "Uh, so this's gotta be over soon, right?"

"Yeah, I dunno. I haven't known what the been fuck's happenin' for like half an hour." He smiled a little when Steve laughed. Steve reached out to touch the collar of Billy's fancy new shirt and then Billy leaned in, kind of slow like he expected Steve to stop him for some reason, and kissed him.

Okay. That was good; that was something Steve knew how to do. He curled his hand around the side of Billy's neck and pressed closer, kissing him back. Their bodies moved together instinctively in the way that they always did and it felt way less awkward.

He and Billy kissed good, Steve thought. He didn't really remember if they'd always kissed good from the start or if it had taken some time to get used to – he was pretty sure he'd liked kissing Billy right away. Sometimes it was weird with certain people or you just couldn't do it right together: your faces always angled wrong somehow or they used too much teeth or there was too much spit or whatever. But he'd always been all about kissing Billy. One time they'd made out for three hours in the den at Steve's house and the whole next day his mouth had felt kind of swollen, a reminder of it. If Steve totally sucked at gay sex hopefully Bill would remember that he at least liked kissing Steve.

They shifted around on the couch and kissed some more and Steve got Billy stretched out underneath him on the couch. Somehow even pinned down Bill managed to get Steve's shirt off in about two minutes; he dropped it to the floor and knocked over a couple empty beer bottles. Billy looked even better than usual, or maybe it was because Steve hadn't seen him in a few days.

Steve was suddenly really glad that he'd showered and taken the time to get ready and all. He started unbuttoning Billy's fancy new shirt, fumbling a little – wow, it was a lot of buttons. He got it about halfway open and then smoothed a hand across Billy's chest, fingers tangling in the chain from his pendant. Bill's eyes on him made Steve's face feel hot. “This is, uh, a good color on you,” he said dumbly.

Billy laughed like Steve was being funny. “Yeah, thanks.” He squirmed underneath Steve and helped him undo the rest of the buttons.

Steve felt a little dizzy; maybe he was drunker than he'd realized. He leaned down and Billy caught his mouth again, body straining up a little, holding his hand hard in the back of Steve's hair.

There was this familiar slow heat building up inside him, boiling up towards urgency, like he needed to touch Billy *more* right away or he'd die or something. He wasn't sure how much time had passed since they'd started kissing – the stupid movie was still on, at least – but he was almost uncomfortably hard now, cock straining and rubbing against the leg of his jeans. It was taking a great effort not to just hump Billy on the stupid couch.

He mouthed at Billy's lower lip one more time and then pulled back a little. “Did you want to ... ?” It felt weird to even ask; usually they wouldn't stop and talk.

“Uh. Yeah.” Billy's eyes were big again, glassy blue reflecting off the light from the TV. He half-sat up, gripping the arm of the couch tightly for a moment. “You wanna go to my room?”

Right. Billy's room. Where they were going to have sex. “Sure. Okay.” Steve stood and moved to let Billy up; the room tilted a little and Bill laughed softly at him when he stumbled slightly and knocked even more beer bottles over. “Oh, shit. Sorry.”

“Doesn't matter.”

Somehow they made it across the room and down the narrow hallway. Steve had his hands in Billy's hair and Billy was kissing him

and fumbling around to unzip Steve's jeans; they stumbled a little when they hit the bed. He got Steve's belt undone and then pushed him back a little, moving to take the rest of his own clothes off.

Steve stood there like a dummy and watched Billy undress. He guessed he was drunker than he'd thought after all: he didn't exactly feel panicked anymore but the room was kind of spinning and he felt a little detached and dizzy, almost like sleepwalking or something.

Bill slipped out of his shirt, tossing it behind himself on the bed. It was darker here in the bedroom, the only light coming from the soft glow of the lava lamp by Billy's bed. He stepped out of his jeans and then just stood there naked in front of Steve, looking gorgeous and kind of uncertain again. His dick was only half-hard; it made Steve feel weird that Billy wasn't as turned on as he was.

He reached out to touch Billy's shoulders and they kissed once more, weirdly soft. When he pulled back Bill was staring at him and Steve was starting to feel weird again, that sort of overwhelmed feeling creeping over him once more. He definitely wanted to do – well, *something* – but he wasn't exactly sure what *something* was. It felt like a big deal, what was happening right now, and he wasn't sure the first time he and Bill had sex should be when they were drunk and over a research paper that they'd made a silly bet or agreement on months and months ago. Bill just looked really nervous and Steve wasn't used to seeing him like this; he was always so sure of himself.

“Hey, uh, you know, we don't have to do this right now,” Steve told him. He was still touching Billy's shoulders. “I mean, we don't have to do it tonight. It could just be, you know, whatever.”

“Yeah, I know.” Billy chewed on his lip; he was still looking at Steve's face and making him feel funny. “I still want to.”

Okay. Okay. Cool cool cool. “Okay, sure,” Steve said. Nervous anticipation rippled through him; he was surprised his voice didn't crack like a kid's. “If you want.”

“Yeah.”

Okay cool they were going to fuck. “Um, you are aware that I have

no idea what I'm doing, right?" he blurted out.

"Yeah. It's okay." Billy said, so Steve stepped forward and they kissed again. Billy stumbled backwards until his legs hit the bed and then he sat down, pulling Steve atop of him.

They fumbled around as Steve leaned over him a little, struggling to unzip his jeans the rest of the way. Billy put his hand on Steve's hip and his eyes flicked over Steve's body; Steve couldn't tell what his expression looked like. "You want me to blow you first?"

"Uhhhh," Steve managed. Jesus. He knew that by this point he shouldn't be surprised by the way Bill just came out and said things, but sometimes it still shook him a little. "Yeah, I don't – probably, probably not, unless you want this to be over in two minutes."

"Okay. Guess you're right." Billy grinned a little, scrubbing his hand through his hair. He pulled Steve in again and kissed him roughly, raking his hands over Steve's back.

Okay. Steve still had too many clothes on; everything was moving too fast and too slow all at once. He kissed Billy back, a little clumsily, wriggling out of his jeans and kicking his socks off. They had to break apart for a moment so that Steve could tug his underwear off. Once he'd done that he felt a little funny, standing there totally naked with Bill just staring up at him. It shouldn't feel funny because they'd seen each other naked tons of times.

Billy sat forward and leaned up and kissed Steve again, reaching out with his hand to fumble around with something atop the bedside table. "You wanna put a condom on?" Bill asked him.

"Oh," Steve said, a little dumbly. "Right." Okay. They were just going to get right down to it, then. He felt a little sweaty all of a sudden; he wasn't sure if it was from nerves or the alcohol that was pulsing its way through his body. "I, uh, sure."

Billy huffed a little, the corners of his mouth ticking up like he thought Steve was being funny again. "Okay, man, I know you at least know how to do this part." Steve just stared at him like an idiot so Bill rolled his eyes and tore the condom open. He pulled it out and

rolled it over the head of Steve's cock with surprising ease, then pressed a bottle of lube into Steve's hand. Apparently he'd bought that too. Wow.

“Okay, uh, you did that a little too well,” Steve told him skeptically; Bill laughed.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Okay, I am, I'm not talking anymore.” Except then he really had to talk some more. “So did you just want me to ... ?”

“I guess.” Bill was back to looking uncertain again which wasn't what Steve had wanted. “Uh, I don't really ... how d'you want me?”

Jesus Christ. “Uh,” Steve said too. “I don't – yeah, you're gonna have to, uh, tell me what you want, I really don't know what the fuck I'm doing.”

“I know. Me either.”

“I dunno what we, like, what's the easiest way.”

“I guess – okay.” Bill sat back, kicking Steve in the leg a little. “Do you just want to ... here, move.” Steve backed up a step and watched as Bill turned over onto his stomach, bracing his weight on his hands and knees, back arching a little. His long curly hair spill over one shoulder, and he looked – holy God. Wow.

“Uh, OKAY,” Steve said, way too loudly than he'd wanted to. He felt his cock twitch as he stared down at Billy; he probably looked like a total idiot. “Okay, so you want – ”

“Can you do it like that?” Bill asked him, turning his head to look over his shoulder. Jesus Christ, he looked like a fucking porno ad, all spread out like that. Well, what Steve imagined a porno ad with a really hot guy looked like, at least.

Steve was super turned on but he could feel himself starting to freak out a little bit again, too. They were actually going to fuck. “Yeah, I, I, uh, I think so. Um.” He wasn't exactly sure what to do for a second; after another moment he stepped forward and moved over a little to

stand behind Billy. The bed was a good height, he thought, a little hysterically. "Uh. So you want. Should I just – like, now?"

"Oh, my god, Steve. Just fucking do something before I freak out."

Yeah, you're telling me, Steve decided not to say. He felt really overwhelmed again – it wasn't what he'd been expecting. He'd actually never even done it this way with a girl, like with the other person on their hands and knees. Steve was okay at sex, he liked to think, but he wasn't like a super stud or something. It felt kind of weird to do it like this and not see Billy's face or anything.

He reached out, leaning over, and smoothed a hand over Bill's shoulder, trying to calm down. Damn, Billy had a really incredible body – it would be unfair, except for the fact that Steve was the one who got to look at him and touch him. He ran his fingertips down Billy's spine, over the curve of his ass. "God, you look so fucking hot right now," he couldn't help babbling. "You are really, really –"

"Could really do without the poetry right now, man," Bill gritted out.

"Right. Sorry, I'm going." If Steve was freaked out right now, he couldn't imagine how Billy was feeling. He still had the bottle of lube in his hand; he opened it up and poured some onto his hand, then spread it over his cock. "Do you just want me to, uh. Put it in?"

"I guess," Billy said, still in the strained voice. "I – yeah, come on."

"Okay. Okay." Steve tossed the bottle of lube onto the bed, then wrapped a hand around his cock again, trying to position himself. It felt a little awkward; usually when he was with Billy the passion or instincts or whatever just took over and he didn't have to really think about what he was doing. He felt way too drunk and not drunk enough, also way too nervous.

He ran his other hand over Billy's ass again, then moved down to hold onto his hip. He guided his dick between the globes of Billy's ass – really, it was a great ass – then started to guide his way in.

It was – well, kind of awkward, at first. Steve pushed against him slowly and at first he wasn't even sure if anything was happening,

like maybe he'd misguided the position and was aiming too high or too low. It felt like there was, like, a lot of resistance or something: usually stuff came *out* of there and not in, Steve guessed, feeling a little hysterical. "Uh, is that – "

"Yeah. Keep going."

"Okay." Steve tried to keep going; he didn't want to be all forceful and just shove his dick into Billy. Then finally he did push in somehow and it felt – damn, he wasn't even sure what it felt like. The drinking had been a bad idea; he couldn't really focus properly. It wasn't exactly uncomfortable but it was really, really tight, not what he was used to. Bill exhaled hard and kind of pushed back against Steve and Steve felt his dick start to slide in more. "Is that – okay?" he managed.

"Uh. Think so," Bill said in a funny voice; he didn't exactly sound super turned on or anything. "Uh, fuck. Okay, you can keep – yeah."

Steve kept moving his hips slowly, pushing in, then out a little, trying to get some sort of rhythm going. He gazed down at the muscles in Billy's back as they moved, watching Bill's shoulders tense as he shifted slightly, trying to gauge if it felt good or terrible for him. It started to get a little easier to slide in as Billy got used to him, opening up a little.

It felt like it was kind of taking a long time; usually sex with Billy (or, you know, whatever it was that they usually did) didn't feel like a long time. It definitely didn't feel bad or anything but Steve was drunk and really nervous and he couldn't tell what Bill's face looked like. He pushed in a little too hard without meaning to – he guessed he was feeling something after all – then stopped abruptly when Billy breathed out harshly, tensing up.

"Uh, what was – was that okay?"

"It's fine," Billy said in his new strained voice. "Keep going, I'm good."

"Okay. Okay." Steve kept going; he had to brace a hand against Billy's back as he fucked into him. He was beginning to feel that

pulsing heat low in his stomach and in his cock which meant he was going to come soon; he had to try really hard not to go too fast or to push in too deep. It felt like they'd been going for a while but his cock was still only about halfway in; he thrust a little more forcefully and Bill made a harsh sound, pushing back to meet him.

They moved against each other for a few moments, breathing heavily. Steve was less nervous now and it was starting to feel really good. Bill kept making these little sounds when Steve would press into him, getting a little deeper with each thrust. Totally hot. Steve loved the stuff that he and Bill did together but it had been a long time since he'd had real sex like this; he'd forgotten how amazing it felt, being inside somebody, the heat of them around his dick.

He held his hand against Billy's hip and tried to push in even deeper; he guessed he went too hard or something because Billy jerked forward, making a strained little sound that definitely didn't sound good or sexy.

“Ah – fuck – okay – ”

Steve stopped; everything stopped, really. “Sorry, are you – ”

“Uh,” Billy said, sounding really overwhelmed. He shifted on the bed, sliding down and spreading his legs a little. “It's, uh – I'm, I'm good, you can just finish.”

Steve felt sort of dizzy. He'd been so focused on what he was doing and how it felt for him that he'd kind of forgotten to be slow or careful. “What, does it – am I hurting you?” he asked, concerned.

“I don't ... uh, a little,” Billy admitted. That probably meant a lot. “It's, it's fine. You can keep going.”

Okay. Obviously it wasn't fine. Steve wasn't going to finish or keep going if Bill wasn't into it or if Steve was *fucking hurting* him, Jesus. “Okay, no, yeah, we can stop.”

“I said it's fine.”

He backed up slowly, feeling Billy's muscles strain around him as he pulled out. “I, I don't, yeah, Bill, I don't wanna do this if it's, like,

hurting you or if you don't like it. I, I can't, I don't think I can do it like this." They were only a few feet away and it was dumb but Steve felt weirdly cold now, not being inside him.

Bill flopped down on his stomach and then turned over. He pulled himself up on the mattress, closer to the headboard. "Uh. Sorry," he muttered.

"No, it's okay." Steve moved around the bed and stretched out beside him, pulling the condom off himself. He was pretty sure he was laying on the bottle of lube. His dick was still super hard and it actually kind of hurt a little, like when you were really really horny and then had to stop. He covered himself with one of the blankets so that Billy didn't have to stare at his huge erection. They laid there together for a moment, awkward.

"You could have kept going," Bill told him.

Steve stared at him, incredulous. "No, I wasn't – Bill, I, I really don't know what I'm doing."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry." Billy looked into Steve's face; he looked really beautiful and really miserable. It made Steve feel bad; sex was supposed to be a good thing. "I, uh, fucked it up. I, I, you know, I love you, I just wanted to do it with you."

Oh god. There it was again, that love thing. It made Steve feel really awful; it would be shitty to say it back after the first time that they'd had sort-of, kind-of bad sex, he thought. He was pretty sure. Maybe. He didn't know. Fuck, he was too drunk for this.

"I ... it's really fine." He tilted Billy's chin up with a hand and kissed him a little. His chest hurt and he felt really bad, like he was being super disappointing. Maybe he should have just finished like Bill had told him. He didn't see how he could have, though. "We can try again, it doesn't matter."

"I guess." He still seemed unhappy though. They kissed again, kind of slowly, then started to kiss for real. Billy's long hair was falling against Steve's face; Steve swept it back with a hand, parting his lips a little to let Billy's tongue graze his own. They moved against each

other for a couple moments, then Steve sat up a little, running his arm down Billy's shoulder. There was still stuff that he wanted to do; he wasn't sure if Bill would let him right now, though.

“Hey, can you turn around?”

Bill's eyes opened and he looked confused. “What?”

“Just turn around, let me hold you or whatever.”

“Um. Yeah, all right,” Bill said uncertainly. He shifted around, a little hesitantly, and turned onto his opposite side; Steve felt surprised that he'd acquiesced so easily. Usually (unless they were super sleepy) Billy put up kind of a fight over being spooned or held or whatever, like he wasn't allowed to like that. He guessed Bill was pretty drunk too.

He slung an arm around Billy and just touched him for a minute or two, running his hand down Billy's ribs and over his side a couple times. The room was kind of spinning around him and he was doing his best not to babble out any soppy or poetic shit. He couldn't believe he was still drunk; that was annoying.

He slipped his hand lower, fingers gliding over the sharp curve of Bill's hip as Billy mumbled his name. Bill's cock was half-hard and it stiffened and grew against Steve's palm as Steve jerked him lazily. The night wasn't really over – Steve figured he could at least make Billy come even if he couldn't fuck him like Bill wanted.

He started jerking Billy off, deliberately slow, trying not to press against him too much with his own huge stupid boner. He wanted – well, so much. He hadn't realized he still wanted so much. He kneed his leg gently between Billy's thighs and then moved back a little so that there was some space between them. “Can I just touch you a little?”

“Uh. Yeah,” Bill said after a moment; Steve guessed he knew what Steve meant.

He let go of Billy's dick and ran his hand over Bill's hip and his ass again, then slid his fingers lower. He traced two fingers down the

crevice of Billy's ass, feeling the soft ring of skin around his hole. There was some lube there from the condom and Steve suddenly felt really dumb; he hadn't tried to get Bill ready at all or anything. Probably it had felt really uncomfortable.

Steve touched him slowly for a moment or so, rubbing two fingers against Billy's asshole, feeling the muscles of his rim press against him. He trailed his mouth down the back of Billy's neck, reaching up a little awkwardly with his other hand to brush his hair back.

"Is that all right?"

"Yeah, please," Bill mumbled so Steve kept touching him. He had to stop and fumble around for the lube (he was definitely laying on it; the bottle had been pressing awkwardly into his own hip for about fifteen minutes), then got some on his fingers and spread it around. He kissed Bill's shoulder-blade and the back of his neck again as he worked at him, slowly pushing one finger in, then a second.

"Fuck, Steve," Billy said; Steve guessed that meant it was okay. He kept touching him and fingering him, listening to the sounds of his breath.

"Better, right?"

Bill breathed out harshly in response, pushing back against Steve's hand. The stupid blankets were everywhere and Billy was so fucking hot; Steve had just wanted to touch him and make him come but now he guessed now he wanted to do more stuff.

He pulled his fingers out slowly, debating with himself. "We could – try again. Uh, like this. If you want," he suggested.

Billy was quiet for a moment. "Um. Okay."

"Yeah?" Steve asked skeptically. He didn't want Bill to feel like he had to or anything. It was just that it seemed like he'd wanted to do it so bad.

"Uh, yeah, I – " Bill sounded funny again but Steve was too drunk to try and decipher why. Hopefully he was really turned on too and not super nervous again. "Yeah, we can. I want you."

I want you. “Okay.” Now the issue was finding the condoms; Bill had seemed to want to use them for whatever reason. Steve knew he'd tossed them ... well, somewhere, at some point. Or maybe Billy had had them – Steve couldn't really remember. He swept his hand over the bed a couple times to no avail.

“What are you – ”

“I lost the condoms,” Steve told him, feeling silly.

“Oh, right.”

“Don't move, I got it,” he commanded. He actually did not have it; he spent so long fumbling trying to find the stupid condoms that Bill finally laughed and sat up anyway to help him search.

“Yeah, sorry, think I'm laying on them,” he told Steve, shifting forward. Then Steve had to go through the dumb process of opening one up and putting it on; it kind of took you out of the moment, made things feel really serious.

He flopped back down onto the bed too hard, making Bill laugh again. Billy laid down too, turning a little so that Steve could hold him like before. It took them a moment or so to position themselves; Steve slid his leg between Billy's again, then touched him for a while, trying to make sure they were both ready. Finally he took hold of his own cock – it felt like he'd been ready for about forever – and started to push his way in again.

The angle was a little weird but it felt better this time, Steve thought, or hoped at least. Actually fucking getting in was the scariest part – Billy was so tight still, and it almost felt like things weren't supposed to fit. Steve bore down, super scared, and finally got the head of his cock in and then it was better; he slid into Billy slowly, moving closer so that his chest was pressed against Billy's back. “Okay?” It was hard to talk.

“Mm. Yeah.”

He kept his arm wrapped around Billy's waist as they moved together, a little awkwardly at first because of the position. Steve

didn't think he'd ever really done it *this* way either; he guessed he was pretty vanilla actually. After a moment he reached down to wrap his hand around Billy's dick again, feeling it pulse against his palm, jerking him off in time with their awkward thrusts.

Steve was really turned on and he was trying his best not to go too hard or too fast again. They were both breathing pretty heavily despite not even moving too much; Bill made a kinda funny noise and started kind of pushing back against him so Steve guessed it was okay for him too. He dropped Billy's cock for a moment and pulled back a little, reaching down between them to hook his arm around Billy's thigh, pushing it up towards his chest and holding him open as Steve thrust into him.

Holy fuck. Okay, that was really good. Billy was kind of moaning and grunting and pressing back against Steve; it was probably the hottest sound Steve had ever heard in his life. The angle was super awkward with them all squished together like this – Steve was pretty sure he was getting a cramp in both his arms and his side too but that didn't really seem to matter right now if Bill would keep making those sounds.

After another minute or too it felt like too much; Steve knew when he was about to come. He let go of Bill's leg and tried to slow his movements, wrapping his hand around Billy's dick again. “Fuck, Steve,” Billy said, kind of breathless.

He kept moving against Billy and moving in him, trying to be super careful, stroking his cock as he went; he knew how to get Billy off. He sped up his movements when Bill started to moan a little louder. He knew that Billy used like things to be rough but he wasn't exactly sure he should do that right now. He kept jerking him and thrusting into him, almost delirious with the buildup. After another moment Bill said, “Uh, fuck, I – ” and shot his load all over his lower stomach and Steve's hand and then finally, finally Steve was able to come too. It took another minute or two, almost too long it felt like – he had to try not to buck his hips too much or push into Billy too hard.

It wasn't exactly the best orgasm of his life – he was too drunk and they'd been fooling around for too long – but it was still a good one either way. As usual Steve was pretty sure he made a stupid sound,

pressing his forehead tight against the back of Bill's neck. He laid still for a moment, exhaling hard feeling his cock pulse and grow soft before he pulled out.

Afterwards there was a lot of shifting around because of too many blankets and also Steve had to get the condom off himself without making a huge mess. He tossed it away and was pretty sure he'd got the trash can, otherwise they were gonna have a fun surprise when someone got up later and stepped on it.

Billy flopped over a couple of times until he was laying on his opposite side now with his head kind of resting against Steve's (kind of grossly sweaty) shoulder. They just laid there, breathing heavily.

Suddenly it felt kind of awkward or something again. They'd actually had sex and done all that stuff and now Steve wasn't sure what he was supposed to say or do – in the movies they always cut away during this part. He was also extremely drunk still; he definitely didn't want to be drunk anymore. He was a little dizzy and his whole body felt too hot for a moment, flushed with alcohol. Beside him, Bill was extremely silent; it wasn't exactly reassuring.

Steve swept a hand across his sweaty forehead and tried to think of something sweet or thoughtful or comforting to say or ask. It felt like there was a million things he should be focusing on – he should be in Good Boyfriend Steve mode or something, know what to do. There were definitely no notes in his dumb made-up notebook about this kind of thing, though. He felt like he should at least put his arm around Billy or something; he did that and didn't get slugged which was always a relief.

They were still just laying there though and Billy still wasn't talking either. Steve licked his lips and tried to wait for the room to stop spinning. “So was that ... are you ... good?” he managed finally, then mentally swore at himself. Jesus Christ, he sounded like a fucking asshole. He was too romantic.

Billy didn't answer him for a long time and Steve wondered if he'd actually somehow fallen asleep already, or if he was going to, like – freak out or something. He really didn't want Billy to freak out: he was super tired now and it was like 1 AM and neither of them had

pants on. He actually kind of really wanted to do more kissing but that involved too much moving right now.

“Yeah, 'm okay,” Billy said finally after a million years.

Steve wondered if that was all he was gonna get out of Billy; he waited another couple seconds but Bill didn't speak again. “Okay,” Steve said too. “I just, uh. I wanted to ... I mean, that, that was – “

“Don't really gotta talk right now, man,” Bill told him, surprisingly gentle.

“Oh. Okay. No, you're right. Sure.” Steve babbled on. He had more stuff he wanted to say, really – stuff he felt he *should* say – but he was too tired to formulate the words. His stomach hurt now from all the booze and the, well, thrusting, he guessed, and he felt a little uneasy and sex-sloppy: kind of sticky all over, and like he probably smelled bad. His eyes still felt spin-y so he closed them, listened to the sound of his heartbeat thrumming along. He'd talk some more in a minute, he told himself, even if Billy didn't really want him to.

19. Chapter Eighteen (part two)

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy started laughing like a maniac again which just made Steve even more worked up. He braced himself on his elbows above Billy, feeling his arms tremble. "Uhhh my god, stop, shut up."

"Yeah, that's good. Keep going."

"I'm, I'm trying," Steve told him. There was a lot of new stuff happening at the moment; he hadn't meant to say shut up. "It doesn't hurt?"

"Uh. No." Billy was breathing out hard, pushing back up against him. "Feels okay."

"What's it feel like?" He couldn't help asking.

"I don't know, man. A dick up my ass."

Notes for the Chapter:

Literally just porn.

Chapter Eighteen (part two)

That didn't exactly happen, the talking thing. Steve hadn't meant to fall asleep but he totally fell asleep in about four seconds: Billy's bed was still the best and Steve felt good there with his arm around him. Even so, he rested uneasily, waking what felt like every few moments, strangely panicked and then not panicked, twisting and turning in the tangled-up bedsheets, soothed by reaching over and running a hand down Bill's tense shoulder.

After a while he woke up for real, when Billy rose unsteadily from the bed in this weird careful way that probably meant he thought Steve was still asleep. He stretched and padded across the room,

leaving the door open behind him. Steve watched, bleary-eyed, as a light went on and then off out in the hallway. A moment later he heard the shower start up.

Okay, well. Steve was officially awake now, and alone. He scrubbed a hand across his eyes and, with some effort, slouched himself up into a sitting position.

The clock on the little end table by his side of the bed read five minutes to eight which was way later than he'd expected; he had no idea how the whole night had passed. It felt as if he hadn't even really slept at all – it was all dark in here because of the heavy curtains, felt like nighttime still. Steve pushed his hair out of his face and sat still for a moment, closing his eyes and feeling the thrum of his temples pounding away.

Wow. Alcohol was actually incredibly bad, he decided. He was definitely going to have a really shitty hangover: that was starting now.

Billy was in the shower for a really long time, long enough for Steve to start getting kind of freaked out himself. He'd definitely enjoyed the sex last night – well, for the most part, definitely the end result – but maybe it had been a bad idea or something. They'd both gotten pretty drunk for it and that wasn't how Steve had wanted their first real time to go.

Maybe Billy was stayin' in the shower for so long because he was flipping out or something. They hadn't talked after and Steve had meant to talk – maybe Bill thought they'd made a mistake, like they'd gone too fast after all, or maybe it had actually been really bad or something. Steve didn't really think Billy would flip out on him, not now, but he'd definitely done it before when Steve had thought they were good.

Damn. It was hard, to know somebody. He and Billy had been hanging around each other for a whole year now, and it felt like they'd been hooking up for practically half of that, but sometimes Steve still had no clue what the hell was going on in Billy's head. So much bad shit had happened lately, and it felt like they were just starting to get back to normal – back to Steve-and-Billy, this tentative

togetherness. He definitely hadn't expected Billy to hand him a beer last night and say *I want you to fuck me*. He'd really thought they were just gonna do dinner and a movie – maybe catch the end of the baseball game if it wasn't too late – and not, like, have anal intercourse for the first time.

Jesus. They'd really fucked. Billy had let Steve put his dick into Billy's ass and he'd wanted it; he'd planned for it and bought condoms and stuff. He'd let Steve fuck him, get inside him. The thought of it now, startlingly sober, made Steve feel all shivery inside for a second, like he was too hot and too cold all at once. Steve had wanted it, too, more than anything. He still felt that way, even if everything was weird and confusing right now.

Steve got up and, after a moment of fumbling around in the near-dark, found his briefs on the floor, then put his jeans on too. He wasn't sure if he should really get dressed or not. Down the hallway, the sound of the shower rushed on, taunting him.

He didn't know where his shirt was to put it on, anyway – probably still somewhere out in the living room, he was pretty sure. He got this sudden hazy flash of a memory from last night: Bill pulling Steve's t-shirt off of him and kissing his neck while they'd been on the couch, Steve's hand tight in Billy's hair.

Jesus H. It was almost too embarrassing: Steve had been such a fucking dork last night. *What, like right now?*

Steve sat back on the bed and felt awkward and fucked and hungover. He rubbed blearily at his eyes for a moment, thinking. Everything from last night felt kinda blurred and far away, even the awkwardness, almost as if it hadn't really been him and Bill doing it. That wasn't how Steve wanted it to be. He'd never really been in this situation before: where it was serious and where he actually cared about what happened the morning after. It felt different than other times, like the first time he'd been with Nancy – he'd hardly even known her then – or the couple other girls he'd slept with before her.

Okay. Billy would totally kill Steve if he knew Steve was thinking about Nancy right now. He wasn't, anyway – not really, not in any important sort of way. It was just that Billy wasn't a girl so Steve

wasn't sure what he should be doing right now.

Maybe he should get up and make coffee or something, set the mood. What the hell was the mood? He also kinda wanted to go back to sleep, for about four hours maybe. Til noon, at least. Damn, he really hoped Bill wasn't gonna kick him out or ask him to go home. Everything was just a lot, and he'd seemed so weird all last night, and – maybe he'd want Steve to go.

God. Steve was too stupid. He should have told Bill that he loved him or said how great it had been instead of laying there like a stupid dead starfish and saying *Are you good?* as if Billy was, like, a hooker or something. He wondered if he'd already messed everything up.

The minutes ticked by as Steve waited and waited. He really did almost fall asleep again – he was in the middle of a really sexy yawn when Bill finally appeared back in the doorway, toweling off his hair. He stopped short and kinda froze for a second when he noticed Steve was awake.

Steve snapped his mouth shut and tried not to look totally ridiculous. He wondered what his own hair was doing right now. “Hey. Morning,” he said, suavely he hoped.

“Didn't think you were up.”

“For a while, yeah.”

“Oh. Uh, sorry.” Bill just looked at him from across the room, totally still, blue eyes wide and unsure.

“That's okay.”

Billy didn't say anything else. He stepped back into the bedroom and tossed his towel down on the floor, then paused there by the doorway for a moment, pulling his gaze back up reluctantly to glance over at Steve again.

Steve looked back at him. Billy was naked aside from his underwear – they were actually a pair of Steve's briefs, these red ones that had probably gotten mixed up in the laundry. Billy usually wore boxers, or, haha, nothing at all. Another perk of dating a dude: you could

trade most clothes without even really thinking about it. Steve had a huge collection of Billy's t-shirts at his house; he was waiting to get screamed at or pummeled for it. He guessed they had a similar body-type, even though Billy was way more built than he was.

Okay. Steve needed to stop. His mind was running like crazy, darting around and shooting out random stupid stuff, while Bill was just standing there watching him. He stared at Steve lying on the bed with his jeans on and got this funny hesitant look on his face – his dark brows knitted together and the corners of his mouth turned down the slightest bit.

“Uh,” Bill said, awkward. “You goin' somewhere?”

Oh shit. Great. Okay, the jeans had definitely been a bad idea. Steve probably looked like he was trying to pull a fuck-and-run or something. He should have just stayed naked and, like, artfully arranged the three blankets around himself, like in a racy film: *Angel Heart* or some shit, a very awkward movie to have taken Dustin to see last month (“Told you so,” Bill had said, laughing at Steve's misery).

“No, no. I was just – ah. I was.” He couldn't figure out what to say, how to get his thoughts out. “I didn't know if you'd, like. Want me to go home or something.”

“Why would I want that.” Billy was grabbing at one of the blankets and climbing back into bed. He laid and stretched out on top of Steve, slow and careful for once, as if he was unsure if he could or something. He tucked his head under Steve's chin so Steve put his arms around him.

They were both shirtless and Billy's skin still felt damp and cool from the shower; Steve wanted to touch him. He reached over, pulled one of the blankets up around them as best he could. He stroked his way down Billy's back and then up again, tracing the line of his spine, the hard smooth points of his shoulder-blades. “I, I don't know.”

“Do you wanna go?” Billy asked him.

“No. Of course not. Sorry.”

“S'only like eight in the morning.”

“I know. I'm not leaving. Sorry,” Steve said again. He ran a hand through Billy's wet hair; it was going to get all puffy if they stayed in the bed too long.

He felt a sudden weird pull of tenderness as he looked down at him, this nice warm feeling curling low in his stomach. It wasn't exactly a sex thing or whatever – it just felt nice, to hold him like this.

It felt like he should say or do something. “Hey. C'mere.” Billy looked up finally so Steve leaned over and kissed him. Bill kissed him back for a moment, mouth soft, but pulled away too quickly, shifting again to lay his head back down against Steve's neck.

Right. Steve cleared his throat. “Bill, you all right?”

Billy didn't answer right away, didn't move either. He swallowed hard; Steve could feel Billy's jaw click against his collarbone. The long seconds ticked by. “Yeah. Think so.” He was so informative.

“Okay, I really need some, ah, running communication or something here, I'm about to freak the fuck out. Can we, like, talk about the fact that we had sex or whatever?” Steve asked, voice edging up with hysteria.

“Yeah. Sure. What do you wanna talk about?”

Jesus Christ. “I don't know,” Steve said again, still hysterical. “Did you, like, totally hate that?”

“Uh. No, man, I'm good. Sorry. I just ...” Billy felt silent again; Steve craned his neck and peered down at the top of Billy's head. “Guess I just needed to get up for a while. I was thinkin'.”

“Oh. Uh, okay.” Steve could definitely understand that. He felt slightly less hysterical, but kinda dumb now too. Here he was yelling about communication and everything when he just layin' there with no clue what to say either. “What were you thinking about?”

One shoulder shrugged, impassive. “Dunno. You.”

“Okay.” He wasn't sure if that was bad or not. “I mean, uh, good things, I hope.”

“Yeah. It's good.” Billy shifted his weight on top of Steve, knocked a pillow off the bed. He was starting to squirm like a kid which meant he was super uncomfortable. “What about you?”

“What about me what?” It really was so tough to talk about stuff. Steve guessed he knew what Billy was asking, but there was a part of him that wanted him to actually say it. He didn't know if that was mean or whatever, trying to force Bill to talk.

“I don't know. I ... uh ... you okay with what we did?” he asked in a small voice. It was totally weird because Billy never sounded like that, not with Steve. He even *felt* kinda small right now which was weird too. Billy's personality and his attitude usually made him seem bigger and tougher than he actually was. It was always kind of a surprise, even after last night, to see this hesitant, unsure part of him.

Steve kept his arms around him and kept stroking his hands down Billy's back. “Yeah, sure. Of course.” Sex was a big deal. He hoped he sounded comforting or whatever.

“I kinda felt like I was. I dunno. Uh, forcing you or something. I didn't mean to do that.”

Oh. Steve felt really surprised; he'd been the one last night who'd wanted to try again. “No, I definitely wanted to. I mean, I ... ” He trailed off, unsure of what he wanted to say. “I wanted it to, like, be good for you.”

“It was okay.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “All right, wow. Don't flatter me too much,” he said dryly; Billy laughed a little.

“I just fuckin' meant – I, I dunno, was it okay for you?”

Steve thought about it. He knew he'd been freaking out last night about how they'd never even talked about having sex before, but he guessed they actually kind of had – well, in that weird awkward roundabout way that they talked about anything kind of big or

important. *Would you ever; yeah we could; maybe if you wanna; me and you.* They probably needed to get better at that. Steve was always down to do whatever, but he hadn't really been sure about what Bill wanted or what he'd been ready for. It was a lot of new stuff, for both of them. "Yeah, totally. It was great," he said honestly. "I loved it, it was good."

"Okay." Billy scoffed and picked his head up again, rolling his eyes. "You don't gotta do all that, seriously."

"What? I mean it."

"Whatever," Billy said gruffly. "Think I messed shit up like four times. Sorry," he added in a mutter.

He actually sounded kinda embarrassed or something – it almost made Steve want to laugh even though it was probably a moment he shouldn't be laughing at. As if Steve had had any fucking clue what he'd been meant to be doing last night. Billy had been fucking *amazing*. He was so incredible; he could probably get just about anybody to do whatever he wanted. "I mean, I don't really have too much to compare that to."

"I guess." Bill slanted his gaze away again, looking awkward.

"It was great. Did you like it?" Steve asked him; Billy narrowed his eyes and glared at him all cranky.

"Are you serious?"

"What, I don't know. I don't know how you feel."

Bill looked even more annoyed. "Yeah, obviously I fucking liked it."

Okay. Well, that was good. Reassuring. Steve stared back at him, debating whether or not he wanted to get punched.

He decided he could take the hit. "I mean, I couldn't really tell with all your moaning and – AHHA!" he said loudly when Bill slugged him hard. "Ow, Jesus." Billy laughed at him and suddenly things almost felt normal again, almost normal.

Steve shoved at Billy, pushing him away a little, and rubbed at his arm. Would the abuse ever end, he wondered. “*Fuck*. Okay, well. We should, uh, do it again, you know, when we're not super drunk. It would probably be better.”

“Yeah? You wanna?”

“Sure, I want anything you wanna do.”

“Okay.” Billy chewed on his lip. He was quiet again, looking down at Steve, expression strangely unreadable for a moment. “You still wasted?”

“Uh.” Steve thought about it; his mouth felt fuzzy and his head kinda hurt but was otherwise clear. He wasn't feeling too great – just being near Bill right now was making him a little jumpy and anxious, which meant he was probably extremely sober. “No?”

“Okay,” Bill said again. He looked at Steve some more, blue eyes searching Steve's face. He asked, “You want to do it now?”

“I – uh – ” Jesus. Steve stared at him like a total moron. “What, I – like right now, right now?”

Bill looked back at him patiently. “I just said.”

Holy shit. Well, it wasn't like Steve was gonna say *no* . “Okay, what, are you serious?”

“Guess so. Why? You got somewhere to be?” Billy asked him, eyes wide, feigning innocence. Okay they were totally going to have sex again.

“Nope! I'm good here!” Steve stretched up to kiss him again.

Billy was grinning against Steve's mouth. He was such a smug prick, really, under everything – insufferable, if you wanted the truth. “S'okay if you wanna leave,” he murmured into the kiss, letting Steve grab and manhandle him. “I can just go to sleep some more. Be happy for the quiet.”

He was a total asshole, too – Steve didn't know why he'd been

worrying about Billy being freaked out or nervous.

“Shut up.” Steve was already fumbling between them to unbutton his jeans. Clothes were insanely stupid, he was realizing. Billy laughed at him again so Steve rolled him over onto his back, flipping their positions, and kissed him some more. He bit at Steve's mouth hard and groaned when Steve grabbed his arms and pinned them over his head for a minute. Shit, he looked so good, really; Steve couldn't get over it. Also: “Oh, wow,” Steve said, surprised. “You brushed your teeth and everything, I feel really disgusting.”

“Yeah, this is basically gonna be a pity fuck. You look like shit right now,” Billy told him; he started cackling like a demon monster when Steve bit the side of his throat in retaliation. He wrapped his arms around Steve's shoulders, arching back against the pillow. “Oh, shit. Keep doing that.”

They kissed some more, fast and almost frantically, pulling each others' clothes off, not that there was much to get rid of. Steve's jeans got caught around his ankle and then Billy screamed at him too much when Steve jammed his elbow down on the pillow, trying to prop himself up, and accidentally yanked Billy's hair. Everything felt hot and sped-up and dizzy, but somehow not quite as awkward or overwhelming like last night had. At least they kind of knew what to do now.

Steve mouthed at Billy's neck and his chest as he got Billy's underwear off again. He ran his hands over Billy's thighs and his sides and his dick until Billy squirmed underneath him and nipped at Steve's mouth roughly, pushing at Steve's shoulders. “Shit. I want – I'm, I'm good. Get off me for a second.”

“Yeah. Yes. Okay.” Steve shifted off of him and let Billy sit up.

“You really want to?”

Haha. Like you had to ask Steve twice if he wanted to have sex. SEX! With Billy! “Yeah. I mean, if you want. Or we could just fool around or whatever. We don't have to, uh. You know.” He didn't want there to be, like, any pressure or anything.

Billy just looked back at him. "I want to do it."

Holy fuck. Okay. Steve had already been set to go but he felt his cock twitch and grow even harder still under Billy's gaze. His whole body felt flushed. "Okay, yeah," he managed. "Yeah. Let's go."

"All right. Hang on."

Billy got the lube from off the end table (Steve had no clue how it had ended up there again) and opened it up. Steve sat back on his knees and watched as Bill shifted on the bed, pushing himself up closer to the headboard and spreading his legs.

The sound of the bottle opening was super loud – they both laughed like kids for a second and then Billy poured some lube onto his hand. He glanced up, holding Steve's gaze, then crooked his thighs back and reached around, slowly, to push a finger into himself. His dick was already super hard, the red wet tip of it bobbing up against his stomach.

Jesus. It was probably the sexiest thing that Steve had ever seen in his life, and he'd seen a lot of sexy things – most of them involving Billy. "Fuck. You're so hot."

Billy breathed out this shaky laugh, shoulders hunched around a hard exhale. "Shut up."

"I'm serious." Steve felt a little crazy. Sex-crazy or whatever. He was just leaned back on his knees, totally naked with a huge hard-on, watching his boyfriend finger himself and practically drooling over it. He was aware that he probably looked extremely silly. He reached out to wrap his fingers around Billy's wrist and tugged his hand away. "Let me do that."

Billy hesitated for a moment, still looking at Steve. In the muted bedroom light, his eyes seemed so dark they didn't even look blue. "Okay."

Sex was so awesome; it felt good and it was awesome. Steve was pretty sure he could just touch Billy for like four hours and be totally over the moon about it. They fell on each other, kissing and

breathing hard, as Steve trailed his hand down to replace Billy's fingers with his own.

It was a little awkward and sticky because, damn, there was a lot of lube getting everywhere, but still good. He tried to watch Billy's face as he pressed one, then two fingers into him, opening him up; he didn't want to hurt him somehow. God, he really was so stupid – this was how they should have started last night, he thought again.

Steve wanted to do like fifty things at once. He guessed he was making some kind of face because Billy suddenly started laughing at him again, kind of softly at first. It took Steve a second to notice and then glance up.

“What?”

“Mm. Nothing. You're real serious right now, man.” Billy was grinning at him; he had this great smile on his face. He was so hot, Steve didn't even know how he was real.

“I am serious about you,” he retorted, almost absently. He was *kind of* doing something at the moment.

Billy ignored Steve's romantic declaration and laughed at him again. “Look like me tryin' to do my math homework last year or some shit.”

“Oh, shut up, you never did any fucking math homework,” Steve said crabbily, still fingering him. “You just made me buy you food and then fucking bullied me until I did it all for you.”

Billy threw his head back and cackled some more. Damn, it was super great, having your guy laugh their head off at you while you were two fingers deep in their ass. “That what happened?”

“Yes,” Steve told him. “It definitely was. I felt victimized, actually, you may not remember correctly. You were, uh ... you were ... ” he trailed off, distracted, flexed his fingers, trying to position them in this way that Bill usually seemed to like. “Is that okay? Oh, my god, I'm trying to do something and actually make you feel good, can you stop laughing at me for ONE second?”

“Yeah. Sorry. It's good.” Billy didn't stop laughing at him, though, so

Steve leaned down (a little uncomfortably because of how they were stretched out on the bed) and kissed him again, sloppy. He loved touching Billy like this, feeling him, getting inside him. They weren't even really having sex yet or whatever. He wondered if he'd ever get enough of Billy; maybe not.

They shifted around for a moment, falling silent. Everything else in Steve's brain went totally dead – he almost forgot to breathe. All he could focus on was Billy's body and, well, his ass, crude as that sounded. It was almost too much: the tight hot ring of muscle stretching around Steve's fingers, softly resisting yet pulling him in, Bill's mouth against his and his sharp exhales whenever Steve would press into him, over and over. He was so incredible; Steve wanted to crawl inside him or something.

Steve kissed Billy again and started going at him with more force, pumping his hand at a steady rhythm, swallowing up the little moans that Billy was breathing out. He knew how to do this, what Billy liked, get him hot. They could get three fingers in, Steve thought. After another moment Billy groaned and shoved at Steve's shoulders a little. “Fuck, I – hang, hang on a second.”

Steve stopped abruptly. Maybe he'd been going too hard again. “Sorry, was that – “

“No. I'm ready. You wanna?”

Oh. Yes. “Uh-huh,” Steve breathed out. He was so turned on he could barely talk (a rare event for him, Bill would probably say if they weren't mid-almost-fuck). He sat up a little and grabbed at Billy's waist, pulling him closer on the bed.

“Condom,” Billy reminded him all stern like a health teacher at school or something.

“Oh. Right. Uh, where are – ?”

“By the. In the drawer.”

“Okay, yeah.” Steve pulled away, a little reluctantly, to fumble at the bedside table. He still wasn't really sure why they had to use

condoms. They were both guys; it wasn't like somebody could get pregnant. But he'd use them if that's what Bill wanted to do.

After forever he got the drawer open, then paused to stare down into it. "Uh, okay. That is a *lot* of condoms, Jesus. Are you bringing some other guy over later?"

Billy sat up and smacked Steve in the chest too hard; he was laughing again though. "You fucking prick. Yeah, I got my hot neighbor coming here in a while, can we hurry up and finish this shit?" he said; Steve actually gasped.

"Dude, that's not funny." He knew it was just a comment or a joke, but he was surprised at how much it kind of really hurt, the thought of of Bill wanting or bein' with someone else like how they were doing right now.

Stupid Mr. A-5. He was totally old, anyway. Steve's dick was probably bigger. Though, maybe that wasn't always a good thing, considering last night. Steve frowned, thinking about it.

"Oh, my god." Billy was rolling his eyes. "Are you being serious right now?"

"I don't know, you said it."

"Jesus Christ." He clutched at Steve and pulled Steve back atop himself on the bed (Steve lost his balance for a second and nearly dropped the condom). "It's called a fucking joke, babe. Why you even talking 'bout me sleeping with somebody else?"

Okay, well. Steve felt slightly mollified at being called *babe*. He really was so easy, he was starting to realize. Also he still wanted to have sex, very much so. He stretched his body out over Billy's and planted his hands on either side of Billy's head on the mattress, looking down at him for a moment. "I'm, I'm not, I wasn't. I'm sorry."

Billy rolled his eyes and turned his head against the pillow, purposefully not catching Steve's gaze. "Look, are you gonna do me or what?" he asked all cranky. "Come on. You heard me tell shithead yesterday I'd meet her at ten."

Oh, right. Breakfast with Max. Steve had totally forgot that she even existed; he had sex on the brain. Ten o'clock was super far away, anyhow – they had about an hour, probably, maybe even longer. “Please, we have time. Get ready for the best two minutes of your life,” Steve said like a total cornball.

“Oh, wow, yeah? Okay, let's see what you got, pretty boy.”

It was such a stupid nickname – it made Steve feel all flushed anyway. Mostly because they were about to have sex, probably. “Could you, like, not pressure me right now?” He'd forgotten all about his hangover headache; he was sitting up again and trying to tear the condom open.

“You just said – ” Billy stopped and then scoffed a little, arching one of his perfect eyebrows, as Steve dramatically threw the wrapper over his shoulder. “Okay, really?” He fell silent and watched, eyes dark again, as Steve rolled the condom over himself.

Steve was so hard and sensitive that it almost hurt; he'd probably be super embarrassed if he wasn't so turned on. He held onto the base of his cock for a few seconds, trying to calm down. “Sure you want to?”

“Yeah. Yes, Jesus, come on.” Bill spread his thighs out (so hot) and Steve settled over him again, propping himself up with his elbows. Their faces were really close for a second as Steve gazed down at him.

“You don't have to call me Jesus.”

Billy actually growled. “Oh, my fucking god, Steve – ” he bit out; Steve tried to maintain his serious expression but couldn't help it and busted out laughing. “I changed my mind, I don't wanna fuck, okay?” But he was grabbing Steve by the hips, rough hands kneading almost restlessly, pulling their bodies even closer together.

Steve let himself be pulled. He felt a little dizzy, way too horny too. God, it probably wasn't even going to be two minutes. “Sorry. Sure. Wait, no, we're still going to do it, right?”

“Man. Come on.”

“Okay. Okay.” They kissed again, slow and light. Steve could feel Billy's erection between them, so good, this hard point pressing against his stomach. He reached down with a hand to position his own cock where it wanted to go.

It was a little scary again, suddenly – like, to do this sober or whatever. It felt way more real than last night had somehow. Like it was an actual active choice that they were making, not some crazy thing that Steve was going along with because he was drunk and super turned-on and had made a silly promise about a research paper four months ago. He was going to fuck Billy, right now, and they both wanted it.

Steve tried to move his cock to where his fingers had been a moment earlier, this soft crevice of Billy's ass, wet with lube, and started to push into him. It was kinda unknown territory, really, not what Steve was used to at all. It honestly felt like he was having sex for the first time – well, barring last night, anyway – totally clueless, super scary.

There was a brief terrifying moment where everything felt too tight and awkward and maybe just not quite right, out of line or something. Like Steve was doing it wrong again and his dick totally wasn't going to fit or go in, and then they were going to stuck here, sober and stark-naked, with this awkward mess in the middle of the morning. Billy closed his eyes tight, too, and Steve felt panicked and hot and nervous and thought *oh God, not going to work, bad bad bad gotta stop*, but then Billy exhaled roughly and shifted his hips *up* and Steve slid into him and then it was good; they both breathed out hard like geeks.

Okay. It was *really* good, actually, fuck. Steve wasn't too sure about how it must feel from Billy's end; he hoped it was all right or felt kind of good too.

He tried to watch Bill's face as he started moving but they were at a kind of awkward angle now somehow. He settled for leaning down and pressing his mouth against this soft spot on Billy's neck, right below his jaw. Billy smelled good from the shower; he grabbed hard at Steve's back and practically crushed him so Steve couldn't really look at or kiss him much anyway.

“ Uhhhh, ” Steve groaned like a total moron. He was trying not thrust his hips like crazy and push all the way in at first. “Fuck. Oh, shit. Okay. Fuck.” Billy started laughing like a maniac again which just made Steve even more worked up. He braced himself on his elbows above Billy, feeling his arms tremble. “Uhhh my god, stop, shut up.”

“Yeah, that's good. Keep going.”

“I'm, I'm trying,” Steve told him. There was a lot of new stuff happening at the moment; he hadn't meant to say *shut up* . “It doesn't hurt?”

“Uh. No.” Billy was breathing out hard, pushing back up against him. “Feels okay.”

“What's it feel like?” He couldn't help asking.

“I don't know, man. A dick up my ass.”

Well, okay. Steve had figured. He was probably talking too much during sex but he wanted to know, he guessed. He'd obviously never done anal with a girl either or anything. Nancy would *never*; they hadn't ever even talked about it. It felt different than regular sex, he thought again – still really good but just different.

Maybe it was dumb to think of it like that. What was regular sex anyway. It just wasn't like fucking a girl, not that that was bad. It was just Billy, what Steve had wanted, had been thinking about. The mechanics of it all were a little different – Steve knew that was what lube was for. It felt really fucking good but it was still kinda nerve-wracking: Bill was so hot but he was so incredibly tight, too, almost scarily so. Steve couldn't understand how it wasn't hurting him again somehow and he didn't want it to hurt. “Do you like it?”

Billy was biting his lip hard and he was holding onto the back of Steve's neck hard with a hand and he was actually looking at Steve too; Steve was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to get away if he tried. It all felt very intense. “Uh-huh,” he grunted out. “Can you – ?”

“What?” Steve was looking back at him.

“Uh. Keep? Going?” Billy managed.

Oh. Right. Yes. Steve got the hint and tried to stop talking and start moving. This was way better, kind of on top of each other like this – Steve could see Billy's face and all, well when he wasn't being crushed, anyway. He trailed his lips against the side of Billy's neck, breathing out against his skin, not quite a kiss. He started pushing his hips again, slowly at first, and they moved against each other, bodies pressed together into some almost-shape, breaths heavy. "It's okay?"

"Yeah." Billy pressed the side of his face against one of the pillows. "You can go harder."

Jesus Christ. "Uh-huh," Steve said again, succinctly, like a sex stud. He kept moving and pressing against Billy and fucking into him. God. Lube was really great. It was almost too much; it had only been like half a minute and somehow they were both super sweaty. "Do I smell bad?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" Billy turned his head and actually looked at Steve again, eyes flashing with confusion. "No, I, I don't know. I don't care."

"Okay."

"Stop sayin' shit," Billy begged him.

"Okay." Right. They were having an experience. Billy actually looked really beautiful or whatever, damp hair splayed out on the pillow, all sharp collarbones and tanned flushed skin. He just looked really perfect; Steve wondered how bad he'd get killed if he said that out loud.

He leaned down to kiss him again and misjudged the distance – their mouths mashed together too roughly as they thrust up against each other, this hard mess of teeth and lips and spit. Billy saved the kiss by capturing Steve's bottom lip between his own, biting a little and holding them both in place, darting his tongue into Steve's mouth and making him moan out this embarrassing sound. Fuck. He was too hot.

The actual act didn't take long. Steve thought (hoped) that he was usually pretty okay at sex, but he was still a horny teenager after all, well if nineteen still counted as a teenager. Plus they hadn't really done this before plus also Billy was like superhumanly attractive

which needed to be taken into account as well.

They moved together, awkward at first and more surely, working towards some kind of rhythm. Steve wanted to freeze time: he was trying not to embarrass himself and bust his load in two seconds. He could feel Billy's sharp hipbones pressing against his own and Billy's dick rubbing against his stomach and everything was so good – Steve didn't even mind the condom or anything and he usually always minded the condom.

After another minute or so Billy groaned out again and wrapped his legs around Steve's waist and started fucking up harder against him. He was actually extremely acrobatic; Steve guessed he shouldn't be surprised. Steve made a very dumb embarrassing sound and started to lose it but then Billy was coming too anyway so Steve let himself go.

He rode out his orgasm for as long as he could, thrusting into Billy a few final times before collapsing unceremoniously on top of him in a (probably gross) sweaty sex heap, face pressed against Billy's shoulder. After a moment he decided to be polite and managed to pull out and shift over slightly so that Bill wasn't being totally crushed.

They laid there for a few long seconds, breathing heavily. “Damn, man.” Billy murmured after a while. He sounded a little dazed too – dizzy, like how Steve felt. He reached up to tangle a hand in Steve's hair so Steve turned his head and kissed at his bicep.

His pulse was still racing away; it took him a while to speak. “Not that bad, right?”

Billy laughed softly, this breathless exhale. He dropped his hand from Steve's hair and rolled over onto his side so that they were lookin' at each other properly. His face was kinda red and he was grinning again. His hair was all messed up and crazy and he still looked really perfect. “Yeah. Might've even been longer than two minutes.”

“Okay, I don't know about all that, Bill,” Steve admitted sternly; Billy laughed again. He breathed out and closed his eyes, dark eyelashes fluttering down, when Steve reached out to rest a hand against the

side of his face. "I'll, uh, I'll get better at it," Steve told him.

"Nah. It was good."

They laid there close together in the messed-up bed for a while, running their hands down each others' sides, tracing their sticky sweaty bodies. Eventually Steve had to reach down and pull the condom off of himself, the unsexy part of sex. Billy laughed at him when Steve made a face.

Steve felt totally worn out (and still very hungover – he was definitely feeling that now) but also really happy. His body felt all stretched-out and tired and he was pretty sure he'd actually drooled on Bill's shoulder at one point during, super sexy-like. He could feel Billy's heartbeat thrumming along close to his own, steady and sure.

God. Wow. Already it had been like the best day. It almost felt silly, that he'd been so freaked just an hour ago.

Then Bill sat up abruptly and knocked Steve in the face with his elbow, startling him. "Sorry. Fuck. What time s'it?"

"Ow, Jesus." Steve inhaled sharply, collecting himself. He'd almost been asleep again. "I, I don't know, maybe stop hitting me in the fucking face and look at your damn clock."

"You look at it, asshole."

Damn. Billy was so sweet; they always had really great pillow-talk. Steve turned his head to squint over at the bedside table. "Aha," he said, guilty. "Uh, ten to ten."

"*Shit*. You serious?" Bill dropped his head back against the pillow and groaned, stretching out beside Steve.

"Yeah, sorry."

Billy huffed out a sigh and scrubbed a hand across his face. "Fuck. All right, I gotta get up."

They were both still extremely naked; Steve could think of a lot of appealing things they could do without leaving the room. Sleeping

was one of them. He leaned over to press a kiss to Billy's collarbone, tracing a little pattern down his forearm with two fingers.

"Well, you don't actually have to go," he suggested. Getting dressed again seemed like so much effort. "We could ditch out on Max, she won't care. She's probably got Bev or Lucas with her anyway. They'll find their way over here eventually."

"Mm. I guess." Billy seemed to be hesitating, body tensing up just the slightest bit against Steve's touch. "I just ... "

Steve picked his head up and watched as Bill drew the corner of his lower lip into his mouth, worrying it with his teeth for few seconds. "What's up?"

"Dunno." Billy kept laying there and looking at him. "Yeah, I, I can't though, man, I gotta go," he said finally, sounding almost regretful or something. A little embarrassed, maybe, like Steve would hold it against him or make fun of him if he wanted to see his sister. "She's just been acting real – shit's been so fucked up lately. She'll think my dad fuckin' killed me or I got kidnapped again or some shit, I don't show up to meet her."

Oh. Right. Steve felt like a total jerk for a second – he'd just been thinking of himself and what he wanted right now, not about Max or anything. Of course he wasn't the only person who cared about Billy or who wanted to see him. "Right, no, you're right."

"You don't have to go with me." Billy rolled over onto his side again and propped himself up with an elbow, lookin' sexy. "Can stay here and go back to sleep for a while. I'll only be like an hour."

That felt shitty, making Billy go off somewhere without him immediately after they'd just had sex for the first and second (third?) time. "No, don't worry about it. I'll get up. I could eat," Steve said thoughtfully. "I mean, if I'm even invited with you guys."

Billy grinned at him; he had his familiar expression on his face now like Steve was amusing him. He looked really sweet, too – it still surprised Steve, the way that Billy could look sometimes when he wasn't being pissed off or super guarded or dismissive. "Yeah. I'm

inviting you. Asshole,” he added.

“Okay.” Steve didn't want to ruin it and make some soppy comment. Well, he did and he didn't. He kissed Billy again, quick, on the edge of the scar that sloped up alongside his collarbone. “Know we're super late, can I just shower real fast though?”

“I guess. Hurry up.”

Getting up and out of the bed sucked. Steve sat up against the pillows and watched, with great regret, as Billy stood slowly and tugged his underwear back on (“Come on, man, quit fuckin' watching me,” Bill grumbled roughly, reaching over to shove Steve's head against the pillow). He padded out of the room, rubbing at his bad shoulder, and disappeared into the hallway, leaving Steve to get up on his own.

It took a minute or so but eventually Steve forced himself out of the bed too. Billy snorted at the sight of Steve shuffling naked down the hallway so Steve flipped him off. He left the bathroom door slightly ajar as he brushed his teeth and started up the shower, listening to the radio go on and the sounds of Billy moving around in the kitchen, tossing stuff around. Maybe Bill would make coffee, Steve hoped.

In the shower, he scrubbed himself off as quickly as possible and got shampoo in his eyes almost immediately. The hot water felt good, waking him up. His thighs and stomach ached dully from exertion, even his neck kinda hurt really. It felt almost kinda good, in that weird pleasant sexy-type way, a reminder of what they'd been doing.

Steve bowed his head and let the water run down over his body, still for a moment. He opened his eyes up and blinked away the shampoo, pushing his hair away from his face. He looked at his soap and Billy's soap crammed together on the shower shelf, Bill's razor that Steve was always too scared to use. Max's insane arsenal of girly shampoos in her little shower caddy – she had so much shit here at Bill's place, even though really she only stayed over maybe one or two nights a week – and her stupid purple loofah that Bill was always threatening to piss on; he was so disgusting. It all felt very familiar, the same stuff Steve had been looking at all summer, but different now somehow. He felt really dumb and happy again for some reason, seeing all their stuff together like this.

Back in the bedroom, he put his jeans back on and dug through the dresser for one of Billy's t-shirts to wear. The selection was getting pretty slim – Steve was going to have to actually wash and bring back a bunch of stuff that he'd hawked. There was a tie-dye shirt that definitely wasn't his color; he also didn't wanna be a poser and wear Bill's Def Leppard shirt since he only knew three songs. After a moment he settled on a crumpled-up Scooby-Doo t-shirt, faded green with a tear in the sleeve, a weird thing for Bill to have. It was super old and stretched-out and hung on him kinda weird but Steve figured it was fine enough – it was the weekend and they were just going to the diner.

He ran his hand through his wet hair a couple times, checked himself out in Bill's little mirror – he looked like the same old Steve, skinny and pale, but with dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep – then went out into the living room.

Billy was off in the little kitchenette, dressed now too in his shirt and jeans from last night, crazy-curly hair spilling down around his shoulders. He was sitting on the counter by the sink and smoking a cigarette, looking through some papers for his class. He didn't seem small or unsure or hesitant now – just looked like Billy, the same guy Steve had been falling for all year.

Steve went over to him and leaned in close, crinkling up the papers. “Hey.” He put a hand on the side of Billy's jaw, turning his face up to kiss him.

“Hey.” They kissed twice like a married couple or something; Billy slung his free arm around Steve's waist so Steve started mouthing at his neck. “No, come on. Get away from me, I'll light you up.”

“That's okay.”

Billy laughed and pulled back, then – frowned for a second, actually looking up at Steve. “Where'd you get that?” he asked in a weird voice.

“What?” Steve rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. He wondered if he had a new hickey or something that he hadn't noticed yet.

Bill had a funny look on his face, brows drawn down as if he was confused or something. "My – uh, the shirt."

Oh. Maybe Steve looked really bad or stupid; it was pretty old he guessed. "I dunno. It was like in the back of your drawer."

"That's not ... " Billy stopped, still looking at him.

"What?"

"Uh. Nothing. It's just – really old." He still had the weird look on his face. "Didn't think I had that shit anymore."

He was kinda making Steve feel weird, too, really. It was just a torn-up t-shirt with a dumb cartoon on it. Steve didn't know why Bill looked so – oh, god. Okay. Maybe Billy's mom had bought it for him or something when he'd been a kid, and Steve was being a total asshole putting it on and making him think about her. He couldn't think of why else it would make Bill look all funny. "Do you want me to change or something?"

Billy didn't answer right away, silent, then his face cleared and went back to normal. He shook his head and looked down, twirling his cig between his fingers. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

"I can if you want."

"Nah. S'okay. Made you coffee," he added, reaching beside himself on the counter.

Oh, thank god. Steve put his hands in Billy's hair and kissed him some more. "You're actually really perfect. Do you know that?" It felt safer to say it now, when they weren't super naked and stuff.

Bill laughed and shoved him away, not too roughly (Steve kissed him anyway). His face was getting all red again; he was so cute. Wow. "Yeah, I try. Can you fuckin' hurry up?" He handed Steve some aspirin, too.

"I am, I am ready to go." Steve drank his coffee as fast as possible, then they got their shoes on, edging around each other by the couch. Steve fumbled around for his wallet as Bill checked himself out in the

mirror by the door. He made a huge face as he pulled his jean jacket on, scowling and scrubbing his hands through his crazy hair.

“Jesus Christ, I look like a fucking mushroom.”

“You look great,” Steve said honestly. He had found his wallet, forgotten and buried deep in the couch cushions somehow.. He reached into his pocket and dangled his keys at Billy. “Wanna drive my car?”

Billy gave him that great smile again. “Sure do.”

Bill's pretty older neighbor, their best waitress from the diner, was out in the hallway, bringing her mail up from the first floor. They both said hey to her as they passed and tried their hardest to not look like they'd just spent the whole night having intense gay sex with each other.

They bounded down the stairwell and headed out through the side-door of the lobby. The late-morning sun hurt Steve's eyes and the air was still crisp and cool enough to make him wish he had brought a jacket, too. It was too strange: it felt more like late September than the middle of August. “We gotta watch that movie again from last night, I can't remember shit from it,” Bill told him, hitting his arm against Steve's shoulder.

Steve had been a little worried, earlier when he'd been getting dressed, that things might be weird between the two of them now – the way it could sometimes get after you'd just slept with somebody for the first time. Like it was this big change and all, and you weren't sure of how to act. He was relieved to realize that he didn't feel awkward or embarrassed or anything. It was just still him and Billy. “God, I know. I was so frickin' nervous.”

“You asshole.” Billy laughed at him. “*Uh, what, like right now?*”

“Oh, fuck off!” Steve shoved him off the sidewalk; Bill scuffed his Converse into the damp grass. They were both smiling like idiots. “I thought we were just gonna watch a movie! You know what, I spent

like ten minutes picking that shit out for you, too.”

“We can play it again if you wanna come back later.”

There wasn't really anything that Steve wanted to do ever aside from be with Billy. That was probably super corny or co-dependent but it was how Steve felt. He hadn't been sure if Bill would wanna hang out all day, though. “Sure. If you want.”

“You wanna smoke?” Billy was digging around in his pockets for his cigarettes.

“Yeah, please.”

They walked down the block to Steve's car, sharing a cigarette and not really talking, biting down stupid smiles and knocking each others' shoulders. When they finally reached the Beamer, Steve groaned and collapsed into the passenger side, reaching out to push the seat back.

He fumbled around for his sunglasses and jammed them on his face. Damn, the one frickin' day it was actually sunny out and he had to be hungover as shit. “God. Booze is really terrible.”

“Yeah, think I'm done for like two weeks.”

“Ugh. My head. Why'd we drink so much?” Steve lamented.

Billy laughed a little, starting the car up. “That was you, man,” he reminded Steve.

“I know.” He reached out to rest a hand on Billy's leg.

“You really feel bad?”

Steve considered: he had definitely felt worse. He was already showered and dressed and he'd made it to the car. They were going to get food which was always a good thing. His head didn't hurt too bad and he could have more coffee. “No, I'm all right. I was, uh, kind of freaked out earlier, I guess.”

Billy put his hand on top of Steve's for a moment; it felt nice. They

both looked down at their fingers interlaced. "Yeah. Me too."

"Sorry about last night. I didn't really ... " Steve trailed off, unsure of how to say what he meant. It felt like he should say it, though. "I think there was ... yeah, a lot of stuff I could of done better."

"Turned out okay."

"Yeah?" Steve looked up at him.

"I liked it."

"Uh, I did too. You were ... I had a, I always have a great time, being with you." That wasn't what he wanted to say either. It felt so impersonal or something, the opposite of what he meant. What did he want to say? *Thanks for letting me fuck you, man, it means a lot.* That was dumb shit too.

"Me too. You wanna talk about it for twenty minutes?" Bill asked him. He sounded really resigned, like he would if Steve wanted to.

Steve thought about it. He was good actually for once, well if Billy was good too. "Nah, I just want to eat right now."

Billy was smiling at him, his really nice Steve-smile. "Okay." He pulled away after a moment longer, dropping Steve's hand and dropping his gaze. He scratched the side of his neck and pulled at his seatbelt in this kinda fidgety way that he had, then reached out to put the car in drive. "Uh, we can go."

Steve let his hand be dropped. "Okay." He took his hand off of Billy's thigh and stretched over to put his seatbelt on too before he got yelled at.

Bill could actually be a little funny sometimes, Steve had noticed before. Awkward or whatever. Like with touching and kissing, little stuff like that. When it wasn't going to immediately lead to sex or hooking up it was like he didn't know what to do. It wasn't just with Steve – Bill always looked totally terrified or confused whenever Max would hug him goodbye. Steve found it kind of sweet, he guessed. Billy felt really perfect to him a lot of the time but Steve knew that he wasn't actually perfect. He was a just weird human like everybody

else.

Steve was kind of the opposite himself, with that stuff. He'd never had a problem with hugging or kissing somebody – maybe from his mom and his aunts smothering him all the time when he'd been a kid. It wasn't hard to say something nice to someone. He'd never felt dumb or silly wanting to hold Billy's hand or put his arm around him; it was easy. He was pretty sure his problem was thinking way too much about stuff later and then apparently needing to talk about it for twenty minutes. Sometimes you couldn't talk about everything for twenty minutes though which was the problem.

It didn't take long to get to the diner. Hathaway's was only a few blocks down Main Street; they totally could have walked if they weren't lazy hungover assholes.

The place wasn't too crowded for a Sunday morning. August was more than halfway over – Steve guessed a lot of folks in town were out getting their last vacation days in, off visiting places way more exciting than Hawkins. Soon that'd be him, and Max and Bill too. It was nice to think about.

In the diner, Max was sitting officiously in their usual spot towards the back with Lucas across from her; she looked up and waved them over when the little bell above the door chimed and Steve and Billy walked in.

“God, took you long enough,” she said all crabby once they'd finally reached the table. She had her hair pulled back into a high ponytail and was wearing an oversized green-and-white HMS (Hawkins Middle School) t-shirt, probably Lucas's. “Did we not say ten AM?”

Bill grunted. “Sorry. Hey, man,” he said to Lucas, sliding into the booth beside him.

“Slept late,” Steve added, taking a seat next to Max. “Hey, Lucas.”

“Yeah, hey.”

Max fixed them with a skeptical look. “I'm *sure* . What were you really doing?”

Billy laughed loudly like a loon and Lucas made a pained face. "Dude, come on, don't ask them that!" He said to Billy, "You're actually not even that late. We just got here like ten minutes ago, my parents were at church and I had to stay with Erica."

"Who's that?"

Lucas stared at him for a long moment, raising his eyebrows. "Uh. My ... *sister*? You know. My kid sister? Erica."

"Oh, right. Sure," Billy said blankly; he ignored Steve smiling at him.

"Wait, did you seriously not know I had a little sister?" Lucas looked extremely incredulous.

"Sure I did," Bill lied, still blank.

"Dude, I have known you for two years, why are you like this?"

"Please, he didn't even know Will's name until like three months ago." Max was laughing at them.

Bill kicked her under the table. "Fuck off! I knew his goddamn name."

"Well, that's okay. I *wish* I didn't know who Erica was," Lucas said, rolling his eyes.

"You're so mean, she's sweet," Max told him.

"Yeah, to *you*. "

She made a smarmy face. "What else is important?"

Lucas scoffed and opened his menu up. "I'm so done talking to you."

Max laughed happily and turned to say something to Billy, then paused. She glanced over at Steve again and the smile dropped off her face as she took in his slightly disheveled appearance, his wrinkled t-shirt and the sunglasses still on his face. Her eyebrows crinkled up and she looked upset for a second, almost mad or something. Damn, Steve hadn't thought he looked *that* bad. "What's –

why'd you let him wear that?" she demanded in an accusatory tone, twisting towards Billy.

"What?"

"Shut up," Billy told her in two seconds.

"But you – " Max started; Bill slumped down in the booth and kicked her hard. Max exhaled loudly and scuffled with him, scowling.

"Shut the fuck up, man."

Okay. Steve felt more than a little weird. The t-shirt definitely had to be from Bill's dead mom or something. He didn't know why Max would get upset or be askin' about it though. "Okay, what, what's the deal with the shirt?"

"Nothin'," Billy said immediately, looking over at him. He didn't seem upset or disturbed or surprised anymore, the way he had looked for a moment back at the apartment. "She's just being a little shit."

"I am *not*, " Max said sulkily (kind of like a little shit, Steve had to admit).

Lucas looked around at the three of them, uneasy. "Okay. Is this like an outfield thing?"

Bill rolled his eyes. "No, man."

"Uh, what? What is it?" Steve asked again. He was a little lost – he usually felt totally out of the loop when there was more than one of the kids around, as if he was missing a step or two. The Creepy Kids, Billy called them sometimes like a total geek.

Max was silent for a moment beside Steve. She and Bill exchanged some kinda glance between them – weird sibling stuff, Steve guessed. Bill raised his eyebrows up at her and Max frowned for a moment before her face cleared and she looked over at Steve again. "Nothing. Sorry, Steve. You just look ... you know, more terrible than usual," she said, bright and full of tact.

Jesus H. What a brat. Steve made a face at her. He actually had it on

good authority (Dustin gossiping) that Max had said, back in the springtime, that Steve was *crazy handsome*, when he tried at least. Her opinion might have changed over the summer, though – she'd come across him no less than three times at Bill's apartment just this month, eating cold pizza for breakfast in his underwear. "Ha, ha, asshole. Thanks so much." Max smiled at him and looked normal again.

"Gonna stop being a freak?" Lucas asked her.

She rolled her eyes heavily. "I guess."

Beside Lucas, Billy slouched in the booth and stretched his legs out, knocking his sneaker lazily against the side of Steve's ankle. Steve locked eyes with him and they shared this private grin.

"Gross, stop doing that," Max commanded immediately, looking between the two of them with suspicion; she made Bill start laughing.

"Fuck off." He didn't take his eyes off of Steve, though.

"God! This is sick! I just want to eat!" Max shook her menu officiously; the laminate shook and made a funny sound. One of the waitresses – some younger girl Steve hadn't seen before – was passing by, and she seemed to take Max's theatrics as those of an exaggeratedly unhappy customer. She veered over, pulling a little notebook out of her apron, movements sharp and pointed.

"I'm sorry, were you ready to order?"

Max's eyes bugged out a little and she made her embarrassed goldfish face. "Oh! No! Well – I was just –"

Lucas smirked evilly at her plight. "Sorry about her, she gets really dramatic if she doesn't get fed every two hours. Do you think we could we have a pot of coffee?" he asked politely.

"Sure thing." She looked around at them. "Anything else for now?"

"Coffee's fine."

"Yeah, we're good, thanks."

“Uh, I'd actually like a water, too, please,” Max mumbled, deeply chagrined. The waitress made a big show of writing it down in her little notebook; Steve practically passed out holding his breath and waiting for her to walk away.

Lucas and Billy busted up laughing as soon as she disappeared into the kitchen. Bill's loud laugh made two people turn and stare at them from the counter. “Oh my god, you total asshole!”

Max actually turned purple. “Screw off, Billy!”

“She hates you, man,” Lucas told her happily.

Bill continued laughing like a hyena. A couple minutes later their waitress returned with their drinks and took their orders, still giving Max the cold shoulder. Max was so upset, she even let Steve steal and Billy two of her pancakes without much complaint.

Billy kept looking over at him and grinning; god Steve already couldn't wait to do him again. Okay, maybe not immediately after Bill had stuffed himself with pancakes. All in all, a pretty good morning, Steve decided.

Something changed between the two of them after that, this small and nearly imperceptible thing that Steve couldn't even begin to explain. Every moment they were alone now felt new and exciting and frenetic, as if they'd been going together for about five minutes instead of months and months. Not that Steve was getting bored or tired of Bill or anything like that. But it suddenly felt like when they'd first started hooking up again, super intense and almost a little scary in a way. Steve couldn't keep his hands off of him.

Billy wanted him back just as bad, Steve was sure of it. He hadn't really ever been sure before, he didn't think. It was an amazing feeling, almost like a dream or something. They went through Bill's huge arsenal of condoms in just less than a week.

They had sex again that same day back in the apartment before *Highlander* was even over, messy and tight, a little clumsy, laughing at each other and falling off the couch and onto the living-room floor. Weak afternoon sunlight poured in from the window through the slated blinds, shadowing out a strange pattern, light and dark lines, across Billy's chest and stomach, then his back once Steve turned him over. There was a lot more room now with the coffee table being gone; it was that new yuppie minimalist look.

They had sex on Monday night after Steve cleaned his room up and then called Billy to see if he wanted to come pick up all his t-shirts or if he wanted Steve to drop them off; Billy wanted to come over (they made it to the bedroom that time). Tuesday Steve left work early and Bill finished at five and they spent all night together in Billy's apartment, kissing and touching and fucking. At past ten Bill said he'd probably die soon if he didn't eat something so Steve put some clothes back on and made him dinner. They ate noodles and chicken and broccoli in their underwear, standing around the kitchen and laughing at each other with Billy's turntable on, playing a super scratched-up copy of the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* (probably their best album, according to Bill). He should get Billy some new vinyls, Steve thought.

The days melted together, which wasn't exactly what Steve wanted – he wanted to remember everything. Every touch and every dumb joke and their nervous fumbling laughter, the taste of Billy's skin. Bill's sweet unguarded smile, that one that was just for Steve, the sound of him breathing as they'd fall asleep next to each other. The way he'd always moan a little, every time, when Steve slid into him.

God. Sex was really great. It was a good week.

By the time Friday rolled around, Steve had managed to get himself under enough control so that he wasn't distractedly dropping shit everywhere or smiling like a huge idiot every two minutes at work. Linda had been teasing him something awful all week and she didn't even know about this new development in his relationship – it was so embarrassing.

He and Billy had been together almost every day since last week; in six days they were heading out to the lakehouse. Bill had his class

early on Saturday mornings and he was gonna miss two sessions so Steve (reluctantly) decided to leave him alone for one night.

At home, there was a post-it note on the fridge from Steve's mom saying that Dustin had called twice last night and was feeling ignored. *Shall I begin forwarding your mail as well?* Mom had written on another note below it; as usual she was too hilarious. Steve guessed he hadn't been around too much this week, but he'd had dinner with her on Wednesday, the one night he hadn't been with Bill.

It was the end of August now and mostly everybody had left for school again – no more hockey with the guys while Billy was away at class. Steve felt kinda bad; he hadn't really said goodbye to Alex or seen him off or anything, like he had last summer. Alex seemed to think that Steve was good enough to get into State and he'd even said a couple weeks ago that maybe they could room together or get a place on campus next year. That sounded awesome but Steve still wasn't sure if he'd be able to get in, even with the paper that Bill had wrote for him. He'd resolved to try and not think or stress about it until he saw the letter in the mail.

It was weird to not have to get up early on Saturday and play a sport – Steve had kind of gotten used to having somewhere to be. He laid around with Luke and Leia til noon, when Dustin called him and said that he was actually supposed to meet Billy to play basketball, and did Steve want to come?

Steve had been planning to head over there anyway so he said sure. He knew what he wanted to do with Billy but now he could hang out with Dustin first too.

He showered and spent some time getting dressed and drove out to pick Dustin up, then they headed to Bill's place. Billy must have just finished class; Steve spotted him over at the little park across the street from his apartment complex, messing around with two of the neighborhood kids on the basketball court. Rebecca was there too for some reason, sitting up on the rickety wood bleachers that overlooked the court with her bookbag and two textbooks (Steve didn't know how the hell she had textbooks; it was still summer).

"You're late," she said primly to Dustin as he and Steve walked up.

"I know, Steve took forever getting ready," Dustin said, immediately throwing Steve under the bus like usual.

"Oh, funny. I didn't think he had to give you a ride," Becca retorted so Steve didn't have to.

The other two kids on the court weren't really kids, Steve guessed – he kinda recognized them from the high school so they had to be at least sixteen or something. A lanky blonde kid and a stocky redhead with freckles and braces. Probably juniors or even seniors; Steve wasn't sure. He didn't know if they lived in Bill's apartment complex or were just around in the neighborhood.

Billy lobbed the basketball hard at Dustin's face (Dust actually caught it, to the surprise of everyone). "Hey, you playin'?" he asked Steve. He was clearly in sports-mode which would be fun, at least Steve hoped.

"Yeah, sure. You just get here?"

"Like ten or fifteen minutes ago." Bill mopped his hair off his forehead and then wiped his face with his shirt. He was wearing an old plain t-shirt with the sleeves torn off and his black basketball shorts from the high school, already sweating from the humidity of being outside. There was a slick sheen of perspiration on his shoulders and his stomach too when he pulled his shirt up; Steve tried not to eye him up in a very obvious fashion.

"We were lookin' for a fourth person, now we can do teams," one of the unnamed teens piped up.

"Yeah, Becs wouldn't play with us," Billy said; Rebecca looked up from her textbook and smiled at him.

Right, there were other people around. Okay. Steve could be normal and not a total sex maniac for like an hour. "Okay, sure. I can go for a while."

Dust tried to dribble the ball and lost control of it in two seconds, sending it skittering and bouncing under the bleachers. Billy made an

extremely pained face but somehow managed not to make a comment. "All right. We can do doubles or we can play two-on-three if you want."

They decided to do two-against-three; Bill called Dustin while Steve got the two kids. They took Steve's lead immediately and let him be forward.

He'd kinda missed this, the weird comradery of meeting up with kids in the neighborhood and playing some impromptu game. You could know absolutely nothing about somebody and still play a good round or two with them. Dustin and Lucas and the rest of the Monster Squad were cool and all – okay maybe not *cool* but decent – but they weren't exactly active sports people. Steve hadn't really gotten to play a basketball game in a long while, he realized, probably not since last year when he'd still been in school. He and Bill had done one-on-one a couple times back in the fall but it wasn't the same.

Billy wasn't really on his A-game because he had Dustin to coach – he was basically playin' by himself and Steve definitely took advantage of that. Dust was honestly kind of okay at defense, Steve was surprised to realize, but he had no clue what to do with the ball once he actually got it. He froze up like a deer in the headlights each time and actually screamed and started running with the ball at one point when Steve and one of the guys came at him; Billy had to call a time-out because everyone was cracking up too much.

"You guys get really scary when you play," Dustin told Steve.

He got a little bit better after they regrouped; Steve was going to have to stop feeling shocked. Ten minutes later were at twenty-one and eighteen with Dust and Billy leading because Billy was a fucking monster. "GO, DUSTY!" Rebecca yelled encouragingly from the bleachers as Dust missed widely another shot. "Go, Steve! Oh! GET HIM, BILLY!" she roared when Bill knocked Steve off the court and sent him crashing into an overgrown shrub.

"Bec, we're not all on the same team," Dustin said, huffing and puffing.

"So what?" She was a fair and impartial cheerleader, Steve thought.

At just before one Beverly came riding up on her bike. She circled the park twice curiously and then skidded to a stop, walking her bike over slowly and taking a seat beside Rebecca on the bleachers to watch everyone mess around. She'd probably been drawn in by the familiar sound of Bill shouting and cussing, Steve thought, cracking himself up (Billy stole the ball from him again, checking him too hard).

“OW, fuck off! God!” Steve bitched automatically. “Hey, Bev,” he added.

“Hey guys!” She brushed her short curly hair away from her face and waved.

“Uh, hey,” one of the little teenaged dorks said to her; Billy gave Steve a huge look, grinning. Bev's eyes widened and she laughed, then leaned over and immediately started whispering away to Rebecca, who scoffed and swatted her. It was funny – Bev was a nice kid and all, but Steve was pretty sure that normally she'd never be hanging around a girl like Becca. Then again they were both in the same grade, maybe that meant something.

It was one of those weird hazy summer days where the sky was all overcast and it wasn't too too hot yet, until you started moving and all. The heavy afternoon humidity crept in as they played, making it seem as if the heat was seeping up from the ground somehow. Every now and then sun would break out from the clouds, casting out bright slivers of light and sending this blinding sweltering heat down on everyone; it made Steve feel super dizzy.

Dust tapped out first, collapsing down onto the bleachers beside Rebecca. The rest of them played two-on-two for a while and then Billy did a couple rounds of horse with the other two guys. Eventually everyone just started doing these really bad wild free throws (Steve was pretty sure the two kids they were playin' with were trying to show off for Bev) and then finally Rebecca saved them from overexertion by saying that she and Dustin needed to get going.

“You promised me we'd get lunch.”

“I was waiting for you to say something. I know how much you like

staring at certain people, namely Billy and occasionally Steve.”

“Oh, sure,” Steve said derisively, pulling his glasses off his face. He wished he hadn't worn jeans and a kinda heavy shirt – he was drenched in sweat and felt super out-of-shape.

Rebecca ignored Dustin being an annoying shithead. “Do you even have any money?”

“I brought my whole life savings, six dollars and eighty-three cents,” Dust said emphatically. Bev started laughing at him.

“God, you asshole.”

Rebecca smiled at him fondly; it was almost too gross. “Well, you can watch me eat, I guess,” she said, picking up her bookbag.

The group pretty much split up after that with Dust and Becca leaving. “You guys playing tomorrow?” one of the kids, the blonde one, asked Steve and Billy. His face was bright red and damp with perspiration; Steve was pretty sure he looked similar.

Steve was stretched out on the bleachers like a dead cow so Billy answered for him. “Yeah, prolly not. Maybe next week.”

“Okay. Later. Thanks, man.” The kids high-fived them and set off down the street.

“Did you know those guys?” Steve asked Bill once he'd managed to stop wheezing and grunting – it was hot out, okay?

“Not really. Think the one kid lives down the street.”

“What, you don't know their names or nothin'?” Beverly asked as she picked up her bike; she had her eyes on the stocky redhead. Girls were weird.

Billy pulled a face at her. “Why don't you go ask 'em, trampy?”

Bev laughed instead of getting offended. “Oh! I just might!” She leaned over on her bike handles and made a face back.

“You seen my sister?”

“Think she's at work, I'm supposed to meet her later. Maybe much later.” Bev climbed onto her bike and adjusted her halter top. “Okay, my target's set. Locked and loaded,” she said in a stupid voice. “Wish me luck!”

“Jesus Christ,” Billy said; Beverly threw her head back and laughed at him.

“See ya,” she said to Steve, pushing off on her bike.

“Later, Bev. Good luck, go get your guy.”

Billy made a huge grouchy face at him; he was super sweaty too, at least. “Oh my god, don't encourage that shit, man,” he said like a den dad. He was so funny; he made Steve laugh. Apparently Beverly had entered the weird little harem of girls that Bill was strangely protective over.

“Can we go inside now?” Steve asked him.

“Yeah, I'm fuckin' dying.”

They said bye to Bev and headed across the street to the apartments. “Sorry I shoved ya earlier,” Billy said.

“That's okay, I'll live.” There were no friends or lovers in a basketball game, Steve guessed. He was pretty sure the bruise on his back from hitting the concrete was going to be monstrous. Even so, he'd forgotten how much he'd liked watching Billy play sports or whatever. Maybe that was kinda pervy. Well it was pervy but Bill was just also a good player; he was real intense like with everything else.

There was something about watching someone you were into do something they were really good at – it was just hot, was all. It felt like there was this electric current running between him and Billy in the air and Steve already knew they were about to hook up again. “You looked good out there,” Steve told him as they went on into the apartment complex and crossed the lobby.

Billy laughed and pressed against Steve's shoulder, slick with sweat, pushing past him to go up the stairs. "Oh, yeah, thanks. You did too."

He was pretty sure Bill was teasing him – he hadn't played basketball in like a year. He also hadn't really dressed for playing or anything. He had his glasses on and was wearing Billy's most-hated polo shirt. It had yellow and black stripes on it and Billy and Max both said it made him look like a bumblebee. Steve liked stripes though and he wasn't not gonna wear the shirt.

The hallway up on the second floor was a lot cooler and Steve had never been more thankful for air-conditioning in his life. "Dude, I fuckin' sweated so much I don't think I even gotta piss anymore," Bill told him.

"Please, you're turning me on," Steve said, rolling his eyes. Bill cackled and looked delighted by him.

Billy's neighbor, their waitress from the diner, was a little ways down the hallway, leaning against the wall and going through her mail with her key in the door. She glanced up, surprised by the sound of Billy's loud laughter, then smiled at them as they passed. "Hey there, guys."

Bill actually stopped and went over to talk to her for a moment (Steve hung back a little, trying to look polite and not feel too impatient or dehydrated). "Hey, I got your car done, we're just lookin' over it. You can pick it up on Monday," he told her. "You can talk to my boss, you don't gotta pay on it 'til next month."

Apparently that was a thing that had happened. She looked majorly relieved, shifting the mail to one arm and brushing her hair away from her face. "Oh god, thank you so much. So what was wrong with it?"

"Uh, your fuel pump was going bad. I had to call out to Eastgate to get the part."

"God, really? I didn't even think of that. I had that replaced about three years ago."

Billy shrugged. "Sorry, I don't make 'em, just fix shit. Happens a lot with that model for some reason. But yeah, it shouldn't stall out on you anymore." He was leaned up against the wall by the stairwell, talkin' to her like a kid. "You need to go somewhere this weekend?" he asked.

"Oh. No, honey, don't worry. It's my day off, I'm not going anywhere until my shift tomorrow."

"I can take you out if you wanna go to the store," Bill told her. "Think we're going out later, but I'll be around til like seven."

She moved her mail again and touched Bill on the arm for a second. The smile on her face made her seem a lot younger. She actually looked truly charmed by Billy; Steve supposed he knew the feeling. "That's okay, honey. I got my groceries on Thursday, I don't have Charlie again 'til next weekend. He started school earlier this week already."

Steve had no clue who that was. Bill did, though, apparently. "Oh yeah? He doing all right?"

"Yeah, he did really great. He keeps asking about Max, I'll have to have you guys over for dinner again sometime."

"Okay. Whenever you want. We ain't doin' shit."

She smiled at them again. "Well, I should let you guys go," she said, probably taking pity on Steve. He felt a little clueless, the way you always did when people around you were havin' a conversation you weren't really a part of.

"Sure. See ya." She went on inside her place and then finally Steve and Billy made it down the rest of the hallway.

Bill's apartment was even cooler because Billy and Max were both obsessed with air-conditioning; Steve was pretty sure the thermostat was set to like sixty-five which was way too cold. He was glad for it now, though.

Billy crossed the living room in two seconds and dug around in the fridge. He pulled the last water bottle out and drained half of it

before tossing it over to Steve.

“Oh, thanks,” Steve said, oddly touched. He was pretty sure that normally he'd be kinda grossed out over sharing a drink with somebody. He and Bill had already exchanged so many bodily fluids though so it didn't really seem to matter. “Damn, I can't believe Dustin actually scored eight points.”

“I know, right? He's been gettin' better.”

“When you'd guys even play before?”

“Dunno. Last month when you went out to the city,” Bill told him. “I make him do drills and shit in the mornin' before he starts running. It's, uh. Extremely fun for me, he almost passed out last week.”

Wow. That was a lot. “No, I don't know how you guys do that shit, I can't even function before seven,” Steve said. It was part of why he hadn't gone out track once he'd started high school. They had their meets at like six AM and Steve wasn't about that.

Billy grinned at Steve like he was being funny. He watched Steve drink the water and then reached out, tugging Steve towards him by the edge of his shirt.

He looked all cute and shit, hand twisting up in the hem of Steve's stupid shirt. It made Steve feel really happy and goofy despite almost being ready to pass out from dehydration. “What?”

“Nothin'. I dunno.” Bill leaned against the counter by the sink and pulled Steve in even closer. “Hey. You did look good out there,” he said.

Oh man. He was super cute. Steve let himself be pulled. “Yeah, thanks. What's, uh, what's happening right now? You wanna fool around with me?” Steve asked, teasing him.

Billy grinned and slung his arms over Steve's shoulders, heavy. “Guess so.”

Steve staggered a little against the weight of him. They were being too stupid, laughing together. He felt dizzy and drunk from the heat

of being outside still. He pushed himself forward and got Billy backed up against the counter and kissed him softly, the side of his mouth, tasting his salty sweaty skin. "Damn, don't sound so eager."

"Whatever. I always wanna fool around with you." Bill's face was flushed again like how it had been on the basketball court and he looked so sweet and sexy; Steve already knew they were going to do it again. He kissed him some more, trailing his lips below Billy's ear before pulling away.

"So you fixed your neighbor's car?" His treacherous mouth was betraying him and blabbing out questions. He really had no clue why he was even talkin' right now; there was so much other stuff they could be doing.

"Mm?" Billy had his hands up the back of Steve's shirt and his mouth on Steve's neck. He pulled back a little and tilted his head like a cat. "Who?"

"That lady we were just with in the hallway?" Steve reminded him. "You know, from the diner?" He was a horrible person but he couldn't even remember her name. She'd introduced herself to him before and he'd seen her around a bunch so he should know it. "Uh. Darlene?" he tried.

"Almost. Donna," Bill told him, rolling his eyes and smiling.

"Oh, right. Sorry."

"Don't gotta be sorry to me." Now one of Billy's hands had moved around to the fly of Steve's jeans which was. A little distracting. Steve was very obviously hard and ready to go; he felt shocked that Bill hadn't made a comment yet.

"When'd. Ah. When'd you fix her car?"

"Dunno." Billy bent his head down in concentration and loosened the strap of Steve's belt, tugging it free from the buckle. "Oh, uh – yeah, Wednesday night. I mean, it ain't totally fixed yet, I wanna check it over one more time. She came in at like five-thirty all freaked out. S'why I stayed late, we had to get her car towed in from the

highway.”

“Really? I didn't know that.” They'd only talked on the phone for a couple of minutes that night: Bill had called him from the shop. He'd seemed a little distracted but Steve hadn't been, like, offended or upset or anything. Billy was real serious about his job and all. By now Steve knew that usually he couldn't compete with a busted engine or an interior detail job (whatever that was) and he was pretty much okay with that.

“Man, I felt seriously bad. She was like almost cryin' and shit. I can't fucking deal when chicks do that.”

“You didn't tell me about that.”

“Yeah, 'cause you never ask me shit no more,” Bill said lightly, starting to grin. It was his flirty voice; Steve asked him like eighty questions every day, sometimes during sex. He was still holding onto the end of Steve's belt. “Think all you care about's a place to stick your prick.”

“Mm. Are you just now figuring that out?” Steve asked him, feigning seriousness.

Billy laughed delightedly, running his tongue over his bottom lip. “You asshole.” He pulled Steve in by his belt and they kissed again.

“That was nice of you.”

“What's that?” Bill was still touching him, hand splayed low on Steve's stomach.

“The, uh. The, the car?” Steve managed, brain fuzzing over with sex-thoughts. He tried to stop being a total horndog for a minute. They could totally still have, like, a regular conversation.

“Oh. Yeah, I guess. S'just my job.”

“It was still nice.”

“I guess,” Billy said again, shrugging dismissively. “She needs it. Got a kid.”

“Really?” Steve didn't know why he felt surprised. He'd always figured that Donna-not-Darlene lived alone. The apartments here were fine and all but they were kinda small. He probably shouldn't say that, though.

“Yeah, who'd you think we were talkin' about?”

“I don't know.”

“Mostly stays with his dad, I guess. He's got that, uh. That thing with his arms and legs.”

Oh. Huh. Steve had no clue what Bill meant. “Wait. Polio?” he asked incredulously, leaning in.

“No, dumbshit.” Billy made a face. “It's, like, that muscle thing. Uh. Palsy thing or whatever.”

“Oh.” He'd kind of heard of that – he was pretty sure they'd watched a video back in school – but he didn't really remember what it was or what it did to you. “Did you ever meet her kid?”

“Yeah, I guess so. He stays with her every other weekend,” Billy told him, absently running his other hand down Steve's arm. “S'like sixteen or some shit, looks like a twelve-year-old. He digs Max a lot, you know how she acts when she wants somebody to like her. We ate dinner with 'em two times.”

“Really?”

“So what?”

“Nothing, I don't know.” Steve still didn't know why he felt surprised. “You do a lot of stuff without me.”

Billy scoffed. He looked like Steve was being funny. “I don't do shit without you. S'just my neighbor.”

“No, I mean, I just didn't know you guys knew her like that.” There was probably still a lot that he didn't know about Bill. Not that it was bad. There was lots of stuff that he didn't know about Steve, too. “So do you eat dinner with the guy in A-5, too?” Steve would lose his

mind.

“Man, shut up.” Billy reached out halfheartedly to smack him; Steve grabbed his shoulder and they scuffled for a minute, laughing, bodies pressed close. “Hey!”

“Stop – *ah!* – come on, stop hitting me!” He shoved Billy against the cabinets again, gripping his forearms.

Billy let himself be pushed, backing up until the small of his back hit the counter. He had this lazy grin on his face, like he was getting a real kick out of getting shoved. He clearly didn't mind Steve pushing him around a little – if he minded, Steve was pretty sure, it wouldn't be happening. It was just this thing they always did, messing around. It wasn't real fighting. Steve didn't think that he could ever shove or hit Billy for real again, no matter what he did. He was lucky that Bill had fallen in love with him or whatever and had decided to mostly be nice.

He slid his hands down and settled them low on Billy's waist, leaning over him a bit. His fingers slipped under the waistband of Billy's basketball shorts, thumbs pressing against the sharp points of his hipbones. Sexy.

Bill reached out to wrap his arms around Steve's shoulders again, tugging him forward. “I dunno, man. She was nice to me when I moved in here,” he muttered. His voice was low against Steve's ear. “Remembered me from the diner and shit. She thought I got jumped or something, I was all beat up.”

“Oh. Right.” That was the official cover story, what they'd told everybody at the hospital. Steve really didn't like to think about that time – not when things were so much better now. Well, he hoped, at least. It felt crazy that it had only been about three months ago. In his mind's eye, he saw all those bruises going down Billy's back, his bloodshot eye and bandaged shoulder. Remembered Eleven sitting in his car and looking and looking at him, all sad and solemn, asking *Can you make him not be hurt?* Steve really didn't know if he could do that for Bill; he'd been trying. “I mean, I know. I remember. She, uh. She gave you guys that coffee machine.”

“Yeah.” Billy still had his arms around Steve. He leaned back a little and looked Steve up and down in this appraising way. It made Steve feel too hot again, as if he was still outside on basketball court, sweating under the blinding sun. “You really want to stand around and talk about my neighbor?”

“Uh. Not really, no.”

Now Billy was grinning at him; somehow he made Steve forget all the bad shit in two seconds. “Okay,” he said.

“So?”

“So you wanna do somethin' else?”

“Yeah, I think I do.” Steve grabbed him and hoisted him up onto the counter. He was actually a little surprised that he managed to do it – Bill wasn't exactly light. Well, throes of passion and all, Steve guessed.

Billy cackled in surprise, clutching at Steve's shoulders too tight for a moment as he shifted around (he almost knocked the dishrack over with an elbow). He breathed out hard against Steve's ear. “Nice move, Harrington,” he murmured shakily.

“Thanks.” Steve liked it, that he could make Billy sound that way. He was leaning in to kiss him again, sliding a hand between them to pluck at the hem of Billy's faded shirt. “Wanna take this off?”

“Uh. Yeah,” Bill said, still in the breathless voice. Steve stepped back a fraction to let Billy reach down and pull his t-shirt over his head. God, he was too hot; Steve didn't want to let go of him for a single second.

He helped Billy tug the shirt off his arms and then let it drop to the floor somewhere, brushing Billy's tangled hair back and dropping kisses against his neck, the slope of his collarbone. “Fuck, Steve.” Billy was grabbing at him again, fast and frantic, fingers fumbling at the button on Steve's jeans.

Somehow their mouths met again; Steve was pretty sure he was moaning like a geek. He palmed a hand over the front of Billy's

shorts, feeling the hard outline of his cock against the fabric. "Fuck," Billy mumbled out again. "Come on, man. I want you."

Steve hesitated for the briefest of seconds – he really wanted to keep just touching him for a while. There was other stuff he wanted to do, too, though, he guessed, even more. "Yeah. Me too." Everything was moving really fast again. He rubbed at Billy's cock some more and then got his shorts off, kissing him again and wrapping his hand around Bill's dick with practiced ease, stroking him firmly. Billy moaned and twitched his hips up in time with Steve's movements, tongue darting into Steve's mouth. His fingers were tight in Steve's hair, gripping the back of his scalp.

"I, I don't – uh. You got something?"

He didn't know what Billy meant for a moment, then – oh, yeah, duh, condoms. "Yeah, I went to the store last night." He let Billy go for a moment and dug around in his jeans; Bill threw his head back and started cracking up like a five-year-old when Steve pulled out a pack of condoms out of his pocket. "Oh, my god, what now?"

"Fuck, man, holy shit. You had that in your pants the whole time we were playin'?"

Jesus H. Steve didn't really feel that it was a particularly funny matter – they were right in the middle of something. Even so, Billy's reaction was kind of contagious, and he felt himself start to laugh too. "What, I don't carry around a fucking purse. You want me to keep them in the bag so Dustin could've gone through it?"

"Je-sus Christ, I wish." Billy laughed in delight. He was the most annoying person on the planet.

"I really doubt that, actually."

"Where'd you get 'em, the general store?"

Steve made a terrible face, thinking about it. "Oh, yeah, I went in and asked Mrs. Byers' advice on what she thought you'd like! No, I, I stopped someplace after work last night."

"I didn't think you'd actually go out and get stuff."

Bill was so weird; the way he thought was so weird. He had bought the condoms last time so naturally it was Steve's turn to get them. It was, like, a partnership or whatever, dumb as that sounded. "I mean, I didn't know if you'd want me to – I thought we should have extra."

"Yeah. Guess we should." Billy was just staring at him now, blue eyes wide, suddenly serious again. Steve didn't know if there was something more he was supposed to be saying. What else was he supposed to say when Bill was right there, being gorgeous and super naked in front of him.

"So do you want to do it or n – " he started; Billy grabbed him hard which Steve guessed meant yes . Steve pushed at him again and Billy made a sound low in his throat, sliding back on the counter and spreading his legs – *god* , Steve thought – so that Steve could get even closer and stand between them. He unzipped Steve's jeans and tugged Steve's cock free from his briefs, gripping a little too tightly.

They didn't need words for this, what they wanted to do. They didn't need words but Steve still wanted to hear it somehow. He needed to hear it. His whole body ached or burned or whatever, wanting to grab Bill and hold him, get inside him. "Do you want to?" Steve asked him again.

Billy grunted and didn't exactly respond. They were pressed so tightly together – he was still holding onto Steve's cock and kind of jerking him off, pulling him forward and ever closer, like Steve was just supposed to know it was okay. "Yeah, come on. Took my fucking clothes off already, what you want me to say?"

"I know, but I – tell me," Steve said urgently. "Please?" Bill rolled his eyes and said, "Jesus, Steve. Just fuck me."

Damn. "I – yeah, all right." Everything clicked into place, spinning fast. Billy helped him tear the condom wrapper open and Steve pulled it out and rolled it onto his dick without glancing down or breaking his gaze; he really wanted to look at Bill while they did it. He grabbed Billy by the hip with one hand, dragging him forward. They kissed again as Steve guided his cock with his other hand and pushed into him with what felt like a single movement.

Bill gave out a harsh sound and reached out to try and steady himself with a hand. His legs came up to wrap around Steve's waist, sliding Steve further into himself; Steve groaned loudly. They really did knock over the dishrack this time, sending a plate and two coffee cups crashing to the floor. Billy started cackling again and Steve gasped and turned his head.

"Oh, my god, sorry!" Steve was pretty sure the Donald Duck mug was in pieces on the linoleum – he'd just drank coffee out of it yesterday morning. "Shit!" He tried to twist around to see the mess but Bill grabbed him by the back of the neck.

"It's fine, man. Don't stop."

"I'm – fuck – I'm not." It was all almost too much – too much heat and skin and flurried movement, like how everything would spin like crazy when you were too drunk. Billy was shaking around him and practically sliding off of the counter; Steve had to keep holding him up and pushing him back and thrusting up into him, kind of shoving him back against the wall.

It felt a little easier to do this now, probably since they'd been having so much sex for the last couple days. He didn't feel so scared now every time he put his cock into Bill, like maybe he was accidentally hurting him somehow; it felt like they fit. But they kept picking the most awkward positions to screw around in somehow – Billy's head kept thumping and bonking against the wall and the side of the windowsill which probably didn't feel great. His sweaty skin kept making these insane squeaking noises as he slid against the counter while Steve fucked him, making them laugh both too much. "Fuck, sorry."

"I'm good." Billy was breathless and laughing, grabbing at Steve too hard again.

As usual this wasn't the way Steve had imagined it would go: he'd wanted to take Billy back to the apartment, kiss him slow for forever and tease him and wear him out and take him into the bedroom. Instead they were just banging up on the kitchen counter by the sink, all sweaty and grunting at each other like in some trashy porno. Bill was totally naked aside from his gym socks (weirdly extremely hot;

Steve decided to unpack all that that later) while Steve's pants were around his ankles and his dumb annoying glasses were sliding down his face and he still had his polo shirt on; he probably looked like a total idiot.

He felt briefly panicked again for a moment – he hadn't really stopped to think or even gotten Billy ready at all. The condoms he'd bought had said *lubricated for pleasure* but Steve didn't know if that frickin' meant anything when it was for a guy fucking another guy. “Is it okay?”

“Yeah. Fuck. Keep going,” Bill ground out so Steve did, gripping Billy's hips and pushing into him again and again. They were both still all sweaty and sticky and gross and it really shouldn't be as hot as it was. Steve's hips kept bashing painfully against the edge of the countertop and he was dimly aware that this whole thing should probably feel way more uncomfortable.

Billy was grunting and growling and clutching Steve's shoulders in this bruising way. His face and neck were still a little red from the heat, the flush of it spreading down onto his chest, and he sighed out heavily when Steve reached out to rest a hand against the side of his jaw for a moment. He was the most amazing thing that Steve had ever seen in his life, all splayed out like this. He kept moaning all loud every time Steve would press into him so Steve guessed it was good; he was saying stuff like *oh God* and *yeah, there* and *Steve* and *fuck me*.

Nobody had ever told Steve to fuck them before so Steve fucked him, bent over against the kitchen counter with his hips pumping and Billy clutching at him and dragging his stupid shirt up his back. He fucked him harder than he meant to, really, slamming a hand down on the counter to hold himself up and thrusting into Billy over and over; god he was so deep in him. It seemed like the harder he went the more worked up Billy got and Steve was just trying to catch up to him. He kept grabbing Bill by the shoulder, the hip, trying to slow them down, but everything felt too good and it was too fast and he didn't really want to slow down or stop anyway.

Sometimes they were kissing but mostly not – it was too tricky to lean over and maneuver and kiss each other yet still maintain the

pace they were going at. After another moment Bill braced his arms behind himself on the counter and leaned back against them, stretching out and holding his weight up. That was a better angle because it meant Steve got to touch him a little more. He ran a hand down Billy's chest and stomach and then wrapped it around his cock, jerking him off in time to his own movements.

"Oh, fuck, okay. Steve," Billy said rapidly as Steve worked him. "Fuck. Yeah fuck. Oh *shit* keep doing that."

Steve liked Billy talking and grunting and babbling out stuff and telling him what to do. He was super into it, actually. Usually it was Steve who couldn't shut up during. Bill shifted again and angled his hips up so that Steve could fuck into him easier and *oh god* okay that was really great too. It was crazy, really perfect or whatever, how their bodies could fit together so well.

Finally they came together in this big rush and it was so intense it almost hurt. Steve wanted to make Billy feel good so badly that he'd nearly forgotten about himself; it was almost a surprise when he felt his orgasm overtake him and he started to come too. His legs were trembling and the rest of his body turned goo – it felt like his batteries were being drained, like in a cartoon or something. Okay, maybe not a cartoon, since they were fucking after all.

Billy leaned forward and kissed him, moving closer again. He bit Steve's lip too hard as he came, practically growling into his mouth like a wild animal or something; he was so damn perfect. He was shaking and thrusting wildly up against Steve, taut muscles clenching everywhere around him.

Damn. Billy's ass was truly incredible – someone should write a book or something about it. Probably not Steve because he was bad at writing and it should be, like, all poetic and shit, and not have spelling mistakes. But then he'd have to go crazy with jealousy and freaking murder whoever it was who wrote the book. God. What was he even thinking about.

Steve paced his movements out as his orgasm wore down, pressing deliberately into Bill a few times more, slower and slower, until Billy finally cried out again, shifting away a little and grabbing at Steve's

wrist. Steve pulled out reluctantly and then leaned with his sweaty forehead pressed against Billy's, both of them panting.

Everything got quiet for a minute – Steve was dimly aware of the sound of the AC clicking on again. He tilted his head a little and kissed Billy once more, tasting the sweat on his upper lip. “You okay?”

“Mm.” Billy was breathing hard, still recovering from busting his load all over Steve's stupid shirt. His eyes were closed and Steve could feel the slight movement of his chest rising and falling, close to his own. “Yeah, I'm good,” he said quietly, finally. “Uh. Need a minute.”

“Did I hurt you?” He'd made that sound and all, at the end.

Billy didn't answer right away. He breathed in and out a few times more, like he was collecting himself; Steve watched his face carefully. Bill opened his eyes and then rolled them. “You need to get over your big-dick complex, man.”

Ha. That wasn't what Steve had meant, like he was just too huge or something. He rolled his eyes too. “No, I wasn't – ”

“If I don't like it, I'll let ya know, okay?”

“Okay. I know.” Steve thought about it. “That one was at least five minutes,” he said.

Bill laughed so Steve kissed him again. They were both so gross right now. “Sure, Steve.”

“What? You don't think it was five minutes?” It had totally been five minutes; Steve felt a little insulted.

“I don't know, man. I don't care how much time it takes if it feels good,” Billy said. He told Steve, “I came really hard.”

Well. Okay. That was something. Steve felt more than a little gratified. “Yeah, uh, I did too.”

“So we're good.”

"Well, sure. But ... you could still say it was five minutes," Steve pointed out; Billy snorted and grinned at him.

"Fine. All right. It was five minutes."

He was making a really cute face. He was still holding onto Steve's wrist lightly, too, and Steve didn't want to let him go. Even so – now that they weren't going crazy having sex anymore – he was very aware of the fact that they were both practically naked in the kitchen, a place where one normally wasn't undressed. Billy was actually *extremely* naked, and Steve was just standing there pressed against him with his jeans around his ankles and his ass out.

They definitely hadn't locked the door behind them and really anyone could walk in – Max had said the other day that she only worked until two on Saturday. She usually came around the apartment on the weekends, and Steve didn't want to, like, mentally and visually scar her any more than he already had this summer. He let go of Bill finally, then pulled the condom off of himself and took a step back.

Tried to, anyway. "Where you going?" Billy asked him. He leaned forward and grabbed at Steve, wrapping his legs around Steve's waist again and holding him in place.

"I'm not – " It was still a little hard to talk; Steve felt totally worn out. Also Bill was kind of insanely strong, like a comic book character. They needed to do this shit in an actual bed again, Steve decided, maybe even behind a locked door. "I'm not going anywhere."

Reluctantly he broke free from Billy's grip and tugged his jeans back up. He felt a little nuts – he'd never had frantic uncoordinated sex on a counter before. He'd never actually had *any* kind of sex on a counter before, really. "Dude, we need to, like – I, I don't want Max to walk in here and see us."

Billy rolled his eyes again. Steve couldn't believe how casual he was being, totally naked next to the sink. "She knows the risk when she comes in here."

"Sure. All right," Steve said patiently. Bill acted like he didn't care but he would totally lose his mind and scream at Steve for forever if

Max busted in right now and caught them both bare-ass by the coffee machine.

“What? I'm serious.”

“Okay, yeah, what if Bev walked in with her?”

Billy laughed and smiled at him; Steve wanted to grab him again. “Guess she'd get a show, been tryin' to get you all summer.” Jesus. That definitely wasn't true.

“Well, I'm shy,” Steve told him. “They don't need to see, uh, all my junk hanging out. We don't have that kinda relationship.”

“I guess. No, you're right. Okay.” Billy slid off the counter and shoved Steve back, then hissed a little, making a face. “Jesus Christ. What's the opposite of rug-burn, I got that on my fuckin' ass right now from rutting all over the goddamn counter.”

Steve laughed without meaning to. “Oh, man, I'm sorry.”

“Whatever.” Bill stretched, arching his shoulders. “I got less shit on, I get first shower.” He moved past Steve and grabbed at the forgotten water bottle again, draining it, then sauntered out of the kitchenette and into the living room, totally naked aside from his stupid socks.

Damn. He looked really great. Steve couldn't imagine ever being so nonchalant and confident with absolutely no clothes on; he definitely didn't look like Billy did though. “Sure,” he said like a dummy, staring after him, then realized he'd just gotten stuck showering with no hot water. “Wait, I – “

“What? Sorry, man. Can't hear ya. Water's on.” Billy was already closing the bathroom door on him, leaving Steve with their mess.

Oh well. Steve couldn't even say he minded at all – they'd just had really awesome sex. He took a moment to collect himself and adjust his glasses, then leaned down and started gathering up all their shit up from off the floor.

The Donald Duck mug was definitely smashed up, which was a little sad. Steve moved the pieces into the sink, then wiped the countertop

down with some spray and hot water and paper towels. He wasn't sure if he should use bleach or what – he didn't know what the cleaning protocol was for kitchen sex.

The blinds over the window by the sink were all fucked up too and kinda mangled somehow, probably from Bill hitting his head against them eighty times. Steve wondered if that would come out of Billy's security deposit – maybe they could buy new ones. He spent a few minutes messing around with them but it still looked like somebody'd gotten into a fight no matter what he did.

Steve finished cleaning up and then collapsed onto the couch; now he didn't know what to do with himself. By some weird luck the remote was on the cushion right beside him so he didn't have to move too much. He clicked the TV on and turned the volume down.

Somebody had left the station tuned to Nickelodeon, probably Billy. The thought of Bill laughing all crazy at *You Can't Do That On TV* or some other dumb kids' show while he ate his cereal and got ready for class made Steve smile.

There was an old rerun of *Lassie* on and Steve watched the TV absently, not really paying attention. A moment or so later Chewy padded out from somewhere in the kitchen (Steve didn't know where the hell she'd been in there; he definitely hadn't noticed her hanging around when he'd been banging the hell out of Billy about eight minutes ago) and stood there by his feet, tail twitching, staring expectantly up at him with her one murky eye.

Steve reached down to scratch the top of her ears so Chewy jumped up onto his lap. Cats were so different than dogs: they never acted too excited to see you and could stay outside by themselves all night. He always felt a little special whenever Chewy would come over to him. “Did you see that whole thing? Sorry.” Chewy mewed twice at him in response, clearly traumatized.

A few moments passed and Steve petted the cat and watched the TV. Max didn't bust in to scream at him – it was some kinda miracle; Steve honestly felt surprised at his luck. Seemed like it was a rare event when there wasn't at least one annoying kid hanging around Bill's apartment. He guessed they'd pretty much gotten to be alone for

most of the week, though.

Billy wasn't in the shower for too long, about another five minutes. The bathroom door opened again and Steve heard Billy moving around in his bedroom. He came back out a moment later, dressed in clean clothes now, and leaned forward against the back of the couch. He dropped a heavy hand on Steve's shoulder. "Hey. Whatcha watchin'?"

"Hey." On the TV screen, a commercial for sugar-free Jell-O was ending. *Only eight calories*, the peppy voiceover announced. "Just some bullshit reruns." Steve let his head fall back against the couch cushion and Billy bent over to kiss him, sloppy and open-mouthed. He slipped a hand under collar of Steve's shirt, rough palm sliding over Steve's collarbone and down his chest. "Mm. Hi."

Bill laughed at him, soft breath huffing into Steve's mouth. "Yeah, hi."

They kissed some more, upside-down which Steve found to be pretty sexy. He reached up to tangle his own hand in Billy's wet hair, keeping him close. Billy's hand moved lower and he scraped a fingernail against Steve's nipple; the small shock of it went right to Steve's groin and he almost groaned, both mentally and physically. He wasn't sure if he could handle more extremely enthusiastic sex so soon after the last round. "Ah, god – stop, I really can't go again."

"I wasn't startin' something," Billy said easily. He pulled his hand back up to Steve's shoulder, though. Then he clamped down on his grip and vaulted himself over the back of the couch to sit beside Steve, nearly bashing the hell out of Steve's knee and startling Chewy off to the floor (he startled Steve, too, really).

"Jesus Christ! Come on, Billy!" Steve pushed halfheartedly at Billy's shoulder and Billy laughed at him again. On the floor, Chewy hissed and spit at Bill being the absolute loudest person in the universe.

"Sorry."

"You scared the cat," Steve told him sulkily.

“She'll be all right.”

“She was laying on me!”

“Oh, my god, man. You'll be all right too.” Billy was grinning; he rubbed at his eyebrow and pushed his damp hair away from his face, then reached over to shove Steve's glasses up on his face. “Nerd alert.”

Steve curled his lip and made a terrible face at him. “Wow, that's great, thank you so much.”

“Welcome.” Bill was still laughing at him. “Yo, Kasia was giving me shit today in class, she said cats ain't supposed to go outside or whatever.”

“Really? What, like ever?”

“I guess. Yeah, I guess like overnight or whatever.”

That was weird – everybody Steve knew usually put their cats out either in the morning when they went to school or work, or at night he guessed. Maybe it was bad or something, though. His backyard was fenced in, but if he left Luke and Leia outside all day or all night, they'd probably break out and do something stupid and be dead in two seconds. “But she's an outside cat, it's what she's used to.”

“I know. What's she supposed to do all day?”

“I dunno. Watch the TV?” They both stared at Chewy as she climbed up onto the loveseat across from them and started grooming herself. “What do you think she does when she goes out?”

Billy shrugged. “Who knows. Crazy cat shit. Like some *Milo and Otis* shit, I dunno.”

Steve started to laugh at him. “What, did you just watch that or something?”

“No,” Billy lied, grouchy. He growled and looked over when Steve laughed even more. “Max fuckin' rented it last night, okay?”

“Oh, my god, that's adorable,” Steve told him, teasing a little. It really was cute though.

“She had that on and then she was watchin' some old, like, cartoon *Jungle Book* shit while I was studying.”

“Oh, I think I know that one. With the weird animation?” There had been a period where they'd played it like every week on the TV for some reason.

“Yeah. Think it's like Russian or some shit.”

“I used to watch that all the time when I was a kid and I was sick,” Steve told Billy. He thought about it. “That and, like, oh I always rented that cartoon about the, the mongoose weasel thing with the funny name. Well, my mom rented it.” The snakes had been super scary when Steve had been like five. He probably still had the tapes somewhere.

Bill made a face. “Yeah, I dunno what that is. Feel like I just had the same three or four tapes I'd play over and over,” he said.

“What did you watch?”

“Uh, I dunno. It was like weird shit, like my dad taped half of *Jaws* off the TV so I was always watchin' that.”

Huh. “Okay, that's vaguely terrifying. Explains a lot about you.”

Billy laughed again. “Does it?”

“Yeah, you still know way more movies than me. I never watched *Jaws* .”

“Are you serious?”

“It came out when we were like seven, I wasn't going to see that shit,” Steve pointed out.

“It's not that scary.” Billy was smiling at him in his really nice way.

“Okay, Bill,” Steve said, extremely doubtfully.

"It's a PG movie, man."

"Whatever." Steve wasn't going to sit here and let somebody tell him that *Jaws* wasn't a scary movie. Not like he'd seen it but still. "So did you ever watch, like, any normal, non-creepy kid shit?"

Billy shrugged, looking thoughtful. "Sure. I must have. Uh, I dunno."

"Didn't you watch like movies with your mom or whatever when you were little?" Steve asked and then thought maybe he shouldn't have.

"Yeah, I guess." Bill didn't seem upset or anything at least. "Uh, I was real into *101 Dalmatians* and shit. *Call of the Wild*. I liked the dogs."

"You're kidding me," Steve said dryly. He could feel himself smiling.

Billy grinned at him. "Oh, uh, what's it called, *Homeward Bound* . Made my mom watch that shit like every other night."

"That's a good one."

"Yeah, thanks." He shifted on the couch a little. "This is stupid."

"Why? I don't think it's stupid," Steve told him. "I like hearin' you talk about stuff." Even now, Billy said so little sometimes. Steve would listen to him talk about dumb shit all night.

"I guess. Hey, we still doing something tonight?"

"Sure, if you want." Steve assumed Bill didn't mean sex or whatever because they usually went ahead and did that without needing to discuss it. "Still wanna see a movie?" He kinda still wanted to talk about cartoons some more but he let Billy change the subject.

There was this new *Nightmare on Elm Street* crap that had finally hit the theaters in the city – they usually got more movies earlier out on the coasts, Steve guessed. Billy was all hyped up for it of course. He'd mentioned it a couple times earlier this week which Steve figured was a hint.

Billy was so – he'd been making Steve feel so awesome lately. He was so great. Steve figured that the least he could do in return was take

Bill to see his dumb shitty horror movie and let him laugh his head off at how scared Steve was gonna get.

“Yeah, we can do that.” Bill was wearing a black t-shirt now and his usual pair of torn-up jeans; he played absently with a tear by his knee. “I wanna go to that place that has the fancy seats.”

“Do you wanna eat before? We could do pizza or Chinese or whatever.”

“I guess. We should go and get, like, actual food from an actual restaurant for once.”

“You do know that getting food from an actual restaurant means you have to *actually* go and sit down and order and shit, right?” Steve pointed out. He was fine with that – it wasn't like two guys couldn't go out to eat or whatever. He liked being with Bill, whatever they were doing. It wasn't like they had to hold hands and make eyes at each other and kiss over the dessert menu. But Billy got weird about that kinda shit, sometimes.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I'm aware. So do you wanna do that or what?” he asked all gruff.

“Sure.” Steve thought about it. “So, dinner and a movie, that's like a real date and all, Bill. Can you handle that?”

“Fuck off.” Billy looked extremely ticked off at the implication that they were going on a date. His face screwed up like a little kid's and his blue eyes narrowed. “What, is that a big deal?”

“Mm, I guess it depends. Do you wanna go on a date with me?” Steve asked him, totally obnoxious. He thought he might be being a little mean but Bill was so funny right now.

“You prick. You know I do.”

Steve felt really happy all over again. He was pretty sure that maybe even two or three months ago, Billy would never have just come out and said it like that.

It was dumb but it was a little exciting, too; Steve was already

picking through food joints in his mind, trying to decide where they could go. They could drive out to the city first, he thought, maybe to Bloomington or something.

Aside from their one official date back in the spring and a couple places with Max or some various combination of the rest of the kids, he and Bill hadn't even gone out to eat together much before. The diner didn't count since it was a hang-out spot that everybody in town went to and the most expensive thing on the menu was eight bucks. Oh, and there had been that weird super awkward night when Steve's mom had taken them out to dinner – that didn't really count either since it had been with Steve's mom and all.

He decided to let up and stop torturing Billy. “Okay. I'm just checking.”

“You gonna be an asshole to me all night?”

“It's not night, it's like five o'clock.” Bill gave him a long look. “No, I'm done, okay, I stopped,” Steve promised.

“Fine.” Billy still looked incredibly grouchy; God he was so cute.

“What are you thinkin', what do you want to eat?”

“I don't care. Go fuckin' get cleaned up, takes you like two hours, don't it? Go steal some more of my fucking clothes to wear.”

“Do you think I could keep this shirt on? You kinda stained it,” Steve said innocently; Billy's come was still drying on the front of it. “OW! Ow, okay, okay,” he said when Bill shoved him twice, not gently. “I'm JOKING!” His arm actually hurt – he felt a little better when Bill leaned in and kissed him though.

“Go get ready.”

“Okay. I am.” He guessed he should clean himself anyway, also he actually really needed to pee. He got up to go and shower, leaving Billy with the remote and the dumb reruns.

It turned out to be a really good night. They ended up just getting Chinese anyway out in the city, but at a fancy little shop with heavy tablecloths and twinkly lights and weird plants dangling from the ceiling. Their server was this little old lady who was clearly the owner of the place; like everyone else she was totally charmed by Billy and his huge blue eyes. They got extra egg rolls and didn't get charged for them.

The place had actual real chopsticks, not like the cheap splintery-wooden kind you just break apart on your own. Billy laughed his head off at Steve dropping food all over the table acting like he knew what to do with them. He talked about his class and then asked Steve a bunch of questions about his work, which was a nice thing to do because Steve knew his job was boring as hell. Bill paid for the food and then Steve got the movie (they debated at length and left a big tip at the restaurant for being so obnoxious).

Nightmare on Elm Street actually wasn't that bad after all, or maybe Steve was just getting better with scary stuff. Billy patiently explained the plot of the first two movies to him on the way home. It was super late even for the weekend – they'd been at the restaurant for forever and had caught the last movie showing – and after they'd gotten off the highway the roads coming back to Hawkins were pretty empty. Steve drove a little slow on purpose; he was having a good time.

It was a little awkward for like two seconds when they parked in front of Bill's place – Steve never knew how to ask if he was staying over. It was late and he was tired and he didn't want to go to bed alone. Billy rolled his eyes and said, “You gonna come in or what?” so Steve guessed he was spending the night.

“Yeah. Sure.” He followed Billy happily up to the apartment. When they reached Bill's door at the end of the hallway, Steve hesitated for a moment, then reached out and put a hand on Billy's forearm. “Hey, uh.”

“What?” Billy turned a little to look at him and Steve pulled him in for a long kiss, moving a hand up to cup the side of his neck. It was past one in the morning and Bill's neighbors were all pretty boring; they didn't have to worry about somebody being up and around.

Billy kissed him back, reaching up to grab roughly at the collar of Steve's shirt. He pulled Steve in and they stumbled together until Bill's shoulders hit the doorframe. The dull impact sound was surprisingly loud in the empty, quiet hallway, making them both laugh.

When Bill pulled away he had that great smile on his face again, his nice Steve-smile. He smoothed down Steve's probably messed-up shirt collar and lowered his gaze. It was crazy; he actually looked kinda shy or something. "Shit. Okay. Nice move, Harrington."

"Thanks. I try." Steve felt a little dizzy. It was totally silly – they'd probably kissed hundreds of times before. Maybe even thousands, if you wanted to get like real technical and break down every makeout session. You'd think Steve would be used to it.

Billy took Steve's keys out of his hand and fumbled around until he found the housekey he'd given Steve, turning again to unlock the door. The living room was all dark but the television was blaring and the balcony door was open a little.

Steve immediately felt on edge. "Uh, did you leave the – " he started. Something shifted over on the couch and Steve tugged Billy behind himself a fraction, then did the manly thing and nearly screamed.

It was just Max wrapped up in a blanket and watching infomercials. Jesus H. Steve really hoped she hadn't cooked herself anything or like laid on the counter or whatever. "God, Max! A little warning would be nice!" Steve told her, irritated (Bill scoffed a little, slinging an arm around Steve's shoulder). "When'd you get in here?"

Max ignored him. She looked up at the two of them and glared. In the dim blue light of the TV she looked truly terrifying.

"What the *hell* did you guys do to Donald?" she demanded; Billy started laughing.

The weekend passed by and Monday dragged; Steve was definitely ready to be on vacation.

It was crazy-busy at work – they had a lot of buyers for some reason and Linda seemed kind of frazzled with all the new clients. After lunch Steve and Joanna helped her copy documents and prep them up to be mailed out. “God, Steve, I don't know what I'm gonna do without you next week,” Linda lamented all dramatic, then spilled her coffee on the envelope she'd just sealed. Her big blonde hair was frizzing out of its ponytail.

She was too nice or whatever. Steve tried to be helpful but he didn't really do too much, it felt like. He barely ever got to answer phones or do sales. “Come on, I don't even do anything.”

“Are you kidding? Yes you do,” Joanne said. She was sitting on Linda's desk facing Steve, long legs crossed, surrounded by paperwork. If Steve's dad walked in he'd have a fit about her sitting on the desk and probably give her a write-up or something. “And I'm going to miss you too, really. But I'm glad you're goin' out for a while. I don't think you ever even took a personal day, how long's Steve been here, Lin? About a year, right?”

“Yeah, think so,” Linda said. It had been a year in June, actually – Steve had started workin' for his dad almost right away after he'd graduated. It was nice to have a job and stuff, even though he'd gotten it because of nepotism which wasn't great. But it was the second summer already that he hadn't really got to go away someplace and have any fun.

“I took some days off, I took like two days when I went camping last month,” he reminded Joanne.

Joanne made a face. She was really cute and all, Steve thought, not for the first time. Not for him because he was with somebody but she was really cute. If he hadn't been obsessed with Bill all last year he probably would've gotten a crush on her. That was probably a write-up, too. Maybe not, with Dad's track record. “Oh, yeah, what's that? Did you even stay in a cabin?”

“Nah, we pitched a tent. I didn't even shower for like three days.”

She looked totally horrified, big doe-brown eyes going wide and making Steve laugh. “Shut up. No electricity or nothing?”

“Nope.”

“ *Barbaric.* ” She continued, “You never even take any sick days. I count my hours up every third week, my sinus colds are very planned out.”

“I think you're a really pragmatic person, Joanne,” Steve told her seriously (*pragmatic* had been an SAT word; he'd been waiting to use it on someone).

“Well, thank you so much. I think so, too.”

Linda laughed at her. “Hey, some people actually like to work. I wouldn't know who those people are, but they gotta be out there.”

Joanne sniffed and ignored her. “So are you gonna be with your girlfriend all next week, Steve? You guys are leaving on Friday, right?”

“Uhh, yeah. I mean, no,” Steve said. He felt a little awkward all of a sudden – he saw Joanne five days a week and talked to her a bunch. She always gossiped to him about her boyfriends and the crazy stuff her mom would call her up to ask. She always asked about him and how he was doing; sometimes he really forgot that she didn't know about him and Billy. He didn't want to slip up and tell her about it like he had with Linda.

Well, he did and he didn't. Joanne wasn't that much older than him and she seemed cool and she seemed to like him a lot. She was kinda his friend, he guessed. But Steve wasn't stupid – well, not about everything. It sucked but she might like him a lot less if she found out his gorgeous girlfriend was in fact very much a (still gorgeous) boyfriend.

“She's, ah ... “ Linda was making a huge annoying face at him behind Joanne's back, raising her eyebrows and smiling all obnoxious. “Yeah, she already went back to school, so she can't, like, take time off right away. I'm gonna go around with my friend Billy, you know, guys' trip.” It was actually really hard to lie; Steve hoped he sounded kinda convincing.

“Ohhh, that cutie from your mom's party, right?” Joanne closed her eyes and clutched her paperwork to her chest. “Sorry, Steve, he is *really* handsome. Wish I was you.” Linda snorted loudly and spilled more coffee on her envelopes.

“Thanks, he's not really my type, though,” Steve said dryly. Another big lie.

Linda swatted Joanne with a file folder. “Get off my envelopes, Jo.”

The day passed and work ended. Joanne got up to leave right at five, giving Steve a little wave as she gathered up her purse and all her girl stuff.

Steve stayed a little late and helped Linda clean up the front office since it was Monday and it had been crazy. He told her he could take their orders for the day and send them off to be mailed out; he did that sometimes when they got too much stuff coming in after four.

“Oh, no, no. That's okay. I don't want you to have to do all that, Steve.”

“It doesn't matter, it's not a big deal.” The post office in Eastgate was right on his way home and Linda lived like an hour away in the opposite direction. “I won't lose 'em or anything.”

“I know you won't, honey. Okay, well, that really helps me out.”

They spent a couple more minutes getting all their stuff together to leave. Steve didn't say anything else; he guessed he was still feeling kinda weird about Joanne.

“Are you thinking about Joanne, Steve?” Linda asked him right on cue like she was his mom or something. “Did she make you feel bad earlier askin' you about your sweetheart?”

Geez. Linda was so embarrassing always calling Billy his sweetheart or his special someone. Steve was pretty sure she just said it like that in case somebody happened to overhear them, but it was still embarrassing. “Uh, no,” Steve said anyway. “I mean, I don't feel bad or anything. She's fine and everything. I like her. It's just that I, I don't like ... you know, lying about stuff, I guess.”

"You could probably tell her if you wanted. She wouldn't make a big deal out of it," Linda said, stacking all the files up for Steve to carry out. "I mean she wouldn't tell nobody your business or nothing."

"I guess. I don't know," Steve said doubtfully.

He definitely wasn't ashamed but he thought maybe it might be a good thing if all of Marion County didn't know about him and Bill. It just seemed like the more people knew, the more that people found out. Steve had told Linda and he'd told Nancy too which looking back made him feel kinda crazy. All the kids had found out and now even *Hopper* knew about him and Billy. If Hop knew then Mrs. Byers knew about them too. It was getting to be a real big network; it was just a lot.

"You don't even have to think about this place for much longer anyway, you'll be off at college in about five months," Linda went on. "I know we can't keep you here forever."

Oh. Right. That big huge thing that Steve didn't want to think about. "Yeah, if I even get in."

"Of course you will, baby, it's a state school," Linda said. "Listen, Joanne wouldn't be weird about it, she's a very open person. She dated a girl for seven months when she was in college, you know," she told him all casual.

Huh. "Okay. *What?* " Steve said, a little loud. That was very new information, he thought. Extremely interesting information, in fact. He filed it away in his brain to use later for private Steve-time. Haha. Maybe not because that would be disrespecting Joanne. "Uh, should you be telling me that?"

"Oh, she won't care! She likes you, she'll tell you all about it! Her junior year, she says it like it was some big dream." Now Linda was digging through her purse absently like she wasn't telling Steve some extremely sensitive gossip; women were totally nuts. "What was her girlfriend's name, Marina, Marianne. Marisol. I forget. They broke up when she went off to Costa Rica for a year and Jo wanted to finish school. I dunno what happened to them after that."

“Uh, okay. Wow.” Steve honestly didn't know what to say. “I wouldn't have thought that, she always talks about guys.” Maybe this was part of why Linda had been so cool right away when he'd told her how he felt about Billy.

“Sexuality's a spectrum, Steve, everybody likes what they like,” Linda told him like a very informed person. She sounded a little like Dustin when he really got going about something; Steve barely managed not to sigh.

“Yeah, I'm very aware of that.”

Linda went on. “You know, I watched this documentary last fall, it was on PBS television. You know how they do those big programs on Sunday night? My son used to watch 'em with me when he still lived at home. Anyway, it was about this thing, I think it was called the *Kindsey scale* ... ” Oh god, she sounded *extremely* like Dustin, actually.

“Okay,” Steve said. “Thanks, Lin, I actually don't need to hear all about it – ” he tried; Linda told him anyway.

Finally after eight million years Linda stopped talking and Steve drove home, slightly traumatized. He dropped the work orders off at the post office and ended up waiting way too long to make sure it would get sent out right away in the morning; by the time he got home it was almost six-thirty.

He had plans to meet up with Billy and Max at the diner – he'd left Bill's place early yesterday morning because Billy said he was going to put some hours in at the car garage. They both worked today, obviously, so Steve had told Billy he'd get him dinner. He assumed Max would be there too since she was pretty much always around when food and Steve's wallet was involved. Then Dust had called last night asking when they could hang out so Steve had invited him along too.

Steve got home and let Luke and Leia out; he groaned at the dogs standing in the yard and staring at him like idiots instead of doing their business. “Really? Guys, come on.” He went upstairs and

changed out of his work clothes while Luke circled the pool eighty times and Leia chewed on her tail. It took about eighty years to coax them back inside and finally Steve got to leave.

Dustin was waiting in front of Hathaway's, standing around with his bike and his backpack even though it was the middle of summer. He was also eating something in a foil wrapper; he took a huge bite in greeting when he saw Steve. "Hey, finally! I thought you forgot me."

"Dude, why are you eating that?" Steve was pretty sure it was a granola bar, not even an appealing snack. "We're about to get food," he told Dustin, then felt like a huge den dad or something.

"It's a protein bar, Billy says I need to bulk up!" Dust dug around in his bookbag. "Do you want one? My mom bought a pack of twenty, it's coconut-flavored!"

Huh. Steve actually considered for a second, then – "No, I'm good, thanks. You seen Max or Bill yet?"

Dustin's face dropped. "What, they're coming too?"

"Uh, yeah? Is that okay?" Steve felt kinda bad. He hadn't realized that Dustin had thought it would just be the two of them. He knew he'd been kinda ignoring Dustin a lot lately – it felt like he'd been thinking that the whole summer. He kept thinkin' it and feelin' bad and then not doing too much to change it; that was shitty. But he'd kind of had a lot of stuff going on recently. Like, sex stuff and all. It was understandable, Steve thought. Plus Dustin had the other kids and Rebecca and all them.

"Yeah, sure, I guess. I just wanted to talk to you about something." Dust gave him a significant look. "You know."

"Oh. Uh." Steve didn't know. He had no clue what the look was for; he hoped Dust hadn't gotten into another fight with Rebecca. "Well, we can talk right now. Or later, whatever. What's up?"

"Okay, what are you – oh, nevermind! Target acquired, twelve o'clock!" Dustin jerked his chin up and nodded at a point over Steve's shoulder. When Steve turned around Max and Billy were heading up

the sidewalk towards them. "Hey, guys!" Dust said all loud.

Max didn't exactly greet them which was about usual. She had her hair braided up and was wearing Billy's leather jacket for some reason even though it was pretty warm out. Bill would die if Steve ever said it but she kinda looked like his little girlfriend or something. "Oh my god, are you seriously eating right now?" she went in at Dustin immediately.

"It's a protein bar, Billy said I need to bulk up!" Dust said once more like a little parrot.

Max raised her eyebrows up and made a silly face. "Um, aren't you supposed to be *losing* bulk?" she said smartly; Bill shoved her in the back. "*What?*"

"Lay off him. It's for muscle, shthead. Hey, lemme see." Billy grabbed the protein bar or power bar or whatever away from Dustin, Steve guessed to read the nutrition label. "Okay, not bad. That one's okay."

"My mom bought it for me!" Dust told him all happy; Billy made a great face.

"Bet she did. Hey," he said to Steve.

"Hi. Are you trying to turn him into a bodybuilder or something?" Steve asked doubtfully.

Billy laughed like Steve had said something really hilarious. "Yeah. That's exactly what I'm tryin' to do."

Everyone went on into the diner and got situated in at their regular table; Max was sulking around looking for the waitress she'd pissed off last week. Finally she slid into the booth beside Steve. "Okay. I guess I'm safe."

They actually got to order right away for once. Max went on about her crappy day at work and then she and Dustin got into an argument in two seconds about what movie the kids were gonna see together on Wednesday night.

Steve's eyes were mostly on Billy; he guessed they usually were. Billy still looked great like always but he had big dark circles under his eyes and he seemed kinda worn out, as if he hadn't slept good or something.

"Hey, you all right?" Steve asked him, concerned. "You getting sick or something?" It would be the worst if Bill came down with the flu right before they went on their trip. Well, they probably could still go and Steve could take care of him or whatever. Steve wouldn't mind but it would most likely be way less sexy and romantic than he'd anticipated.

"What?" Billy glanced up from the coffee-cream tower he'd been building with Max.

"You look, ah." Steve made a vague hand gesture. "Kinda tired or whatever. You okay?"

"No, I'm good. I was at the shop til like eleven last night, I got these two jobs I wanna finish before we go."

"Ohhh. Okay." Bill had explained to Steve about how his work went before and Steve kind of understood it. He got paid by the hour but he also got paid a portion for every job he did, like tire changes and oil changes and engine work and whatever. Kind of like commission or something, Steve guessed. "Damn, were you really there for like twelve hours?"

"I guess."

"You should take it easy, we don't have to hang tonight."

Billy grinned at him. "Oh yeah? Trying to get rid of me?"

"No, I'm just saying."

He rolled his eyes. "That's okay, I gotta go see Susan anyway. Might put it off til tomorrow, though."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Max advised him. She reached over and knocked down their coffee-cream tower. "Tuesday's movie night, you'll probably get roped into watching *Terms of Endearment*

with us.”

“Oh, Jesus. Again?”

“Uh, wait, has this happened before?” Steve demanded with extreme interest; Bill pointedly ignored him. Wow. It was so good.

“What's wrong with that?” Dust asked, looking around. “Dude, my mom loves that movie. Is it on cable?” Max looked over at him and started laughing. “What? Okay, are you not going to answer me?”

Their waitress (not Donna or the new chick who apparently hated Max, an older lady Steve had only seen a couple times before) came over with their food and Bill immediately helped himself to half of Dustin's fries. “Oh, my god, really?” Dust said, clearly not bothered. “Steve, I hope you're paying for this!”

“Bet you didn't even bring any money, you little asshole,” Steve retorted.

“You should pay for my food anyway, you've been ignoring me all month.”

“I was busy.”

“Busy with what?” Gee. *Having SEX!* Steve didn't say. “It's summer! You didn't even pick up the phone last week! What were you doing, thinking about which way to part your hair today?” Steve scoffed. He didn't know why everybody always got on him about his hair.

“Yo, fuckin' be nice to my guy,” Billy told him warningly; Dustin made a huge face at Steve being called somebody's *guy* .

“What? How am I not being nice?”

Bill ignored him, slouching on the table and turning his gaze back over to Steve. “Hey, bring your car to the garage one night, I wanna check it out before we go. I'll put air in the tires and all that stupid shit, change your oil.”

“Mm. Gee, I dunno if I can afford your services,” Steve told him innocently, starting to flirt.

“Oh, no? Why not?”

“Well, see, I'm kinda takin' this guy out this weekend, he's like real expensive.”

Billy smiled at him again, this slow grin that lit up his whole face, and, damn, Steve really wished they were hanging out tonight. He was pretty sure he'd never been so stupid over somebody. “Okay. Uh, maybe you can do somethin' for me, think I can get you like a special rate. If ya know what I mean.” They were being totally obnoxious.

“I'm pretty sure that I don't know,” Steve said. “Could you maybe elaborate on that?”

“Man, shut up.” Bill laughed a little too loudly and rubbed at the side of his neck, all cute and embarrassed. God. He was so fun. That got Steve distracted staring at Billy's neck. It was a great neck. His shirt was great, too.

He wondered how bad Billy wanted to get food – his place was only four minutes away. If they left right now, Steve could make love to him for like two hours and make him come a couple times and still go home by nine. That meant Bill could still get a good night's sleep and maybe not be so wiped out for work the next day. He –

“ *HUUUURGGLE*, ” Dustin said loudly down at his plate, totally taking Steve out of the moment. “That was me throwing up,” he added unnecessarily. “Into my food. Uh, before I even ate anything, because of how you are acting right now, Steve.”

Steve felt a lot less sexy and way more irritated. “What? The hell, you're such a shithead, seriously.”

“There's innocent people here!” Dustin lisped; Bill leaned over and thumped him hard on the back. “OW, MY SPINE!”

“Shut the fuck up, turdbomb.”

“Steve, Billy's hitting me! You guys are being so gross right now!”

“Leave them alone, Dustin!” Max exclaimed. She leaned over deliberately and took some of his fries too (“Hey!” Dustin said). “I'm

the one who's gonna have to deal with them doing this all next week, anyway.”

“Oh, you don't gotta go with us,” Bill told her with fervor. “Can stay home and hang with your moms, I'll write you some letters.”

Max gave him a dark look. “You wish.”

“Believe me, I *really* do.”

“Too bad! Steve invited me!” They started bitching and bickering at each other; Dust looked depressed with his stolen fries getting cold.

So much for sexy-talk, Steve guessed. He really didn't know why he'd even bothered with the kids around.

By the time they'd all finished eating and talking it was kind of late; Bill decided he'd go to his stepmom's after all and Steve told Dustin he'd give him a ride home.

Dust put his bike in the trunk of the Beamer and then sat in the front seat, crossing his arms impatiently. He made a bunch of faces as Steve and Billy shared a cigarette in the parking lot and listened to Max gab and complain about her job for a couple minutes.

“Don't forget about your car, man,” Bill told him as they parted ways.

“I won't. Uh, I can probably bring it by tomorrow after I finish work. I'll try to leave a little early.”

“Okay. Later.”

Dustin stared at Steve as he got into the car and put his seatbelt on, then turned the engine on. “Jesus, finally! I thought they'd never leave!”

“You know I can't really hang out with you tonight, I've gotta work tomorrow,” Steve reminded him. He twisted the steering wheel and guided them out of the parking lot.

“Yeah, whatever, I know that.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.” Steve was looking at the road but he could feel Dustin staring at him in this intense way.

“Right, what's, uh, happening right now?” Steve asked. “Why are you looking at me and acting freaky?”

“I'm not!”

“Are you fighting with Max or something?” He'd seemed weird earlier when Steve had mentioned her and Billy showing up.

Dustin blinked, looking surprised. “Uh, no? She's fine.”

“Did she like hit you for real again?” Steve asked him. He liked Max just fine but she could be scary as shit sometimes. She also kinda had Billy's weird Incredible Hulk strength despite them not actually being related or anything. “You can tell me.”

“What? No! She hasn't done that since like before her birthday!”

“So why'd you want to get away from them so bad?”

“Um, because I need details about what's going on? You can tell me now that Billy's gone! What are you gonna do for him next week?”

Well. Okay. Steve had no clue what he was talking about. Did Bill need something? “What do you mean? We'll be on vacation.”

Dustin stared at him again. “Yes, I'm aware of that, Steve,” he said slowly, like he was talkin' to a three-year-old. “But, like – okay, what are you going to *do*? You haven't even said anything to me about it.”

“Uh, I don't get you.” They'd probably just go swimming a lot and check out the boardwalks and the restaurants and hopefully have tons of sex. But Steve thought he probably shouldn't tell Dust too much about that last part.

“Steve.” Dustin looked at him some more, incredulous. It was a little unnerving, honestly – Steve was driving, after all. “Come on, I could help you out! I need to be keyed in here! What's the plan?”

Okay. He was starting to get scared that Dust was asking him, like, a sex question or something. He didn't know what else it could be. He definitely had sexy-time plans for him and Bill but it wasn't like he going to go on about them to his fifteen-year-old friend.

Steve put his blinker on and slowed to a stop at the red light on Main Street. "The *plan*? Dude, I'm not – I'm, I'm not talking about that shit with you."

"Uh, right, okay. Why not?" Dustin scoffed looked around the car all amused like they had a TV audience, then commenced staring at him. He was starting to look like Steve was being funny, smiling a little. "Come on, seriously! I'm not going to tell anyone! I know you have some big thing you want to do."

Oh god it was definitely a sex question. He had no clue why the hell Dustin was so interested; he and Bill usually couldn't kiss or even really touch without the kids, mostly Dustin, making a dumb comment. "What the hell are you talking about? We're just, ah, we're going to hang out at my aunt's beach house, I already told you about it."

"Yeah, but aren't you, like, going to celebrate or anything?" Steve twisted around slightly and frowned at him so Dust continued. "Come on, you picked this weekend on purpose! It's your anniversary, right?"

Steve didn't answer for a long time, staring; Dustin waited patiently. "Hello?"

It was like he wasn't processing the words properly or something – it made no sense. There was no reason for Dustin to be talking about, like, *Anniversaries* or whatever. Especially for him and Billy. Because they weren't. It wasn't. Uh.

Shit. Fuck. Crap. Steve turned forward again and gazed blankly out at the street, not really even seeing the road in front of him. There must be a joke or something that he wasn't getting. "Uh. What?" he scoffed, uneasy. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, do you not want to tell people or something?" Dust asked him

curiously. Someone honked behind them and they both startled – the light had turned green. Steve eased off the brake and started driving again. “I thought you were – didn't you tell me you guys got together at like the end of February? That's what you said!”

Geez. Okay, Steve guessed he *had* told Dustin that, after all the kids had found out about him and Billy. He'd never really gone into much detail but he did remember saying that to Dust at some point. “Yeah, I guess. So what?”

“So, it's August now! That's six months, Steve!”

Steve drove the car over a crack in the road and nearly went up the curb (the asshole behind them beeped again). “Uhhhhh,” he said like a total moron.

Okay, that was bad. That was – holy shit. Had it really been so long? It didn't seem possible. Steve felt totally crazy for a few seconds; he had to try and do math in his head and also drive at the same time which was pretty dangerous. “You – why, why the hell do you even remember that?”

Dustin looked deeply unimpressed with him. “Uh, gee! Maybe because I'm your *friend* and I remember things that you tell me?” he said, making Steve feel about two inches tall. “I mean, you guys have been dating for almost as long as me and Rebecca. Even though no one knew about it.”

“Yeah, well, we knew about it,” Steve snapped.

He didn't know why he was snapping. Dustin wasn't being a jerk or anything. He guessed he felt kind of defensive for some reason.

“Okay, whatever.” Dustin continued on, unbothered. “I thought you were going to – I can, like, help you plan stuff before you leave on Friday! Are you gonna surprise him while you're in New Haven? What do you need to do?”

“Ah, I wasn't – ”

“Do you and Billy have, like, a couples' song or anything? What is it?” Dustin asked curiously; Steve nearly drove off the road.

“We don't – ”

“Mine and Rebecca's is 'Hold Me Now,' runner up was 'The Flame' by Cheap Trick,” Dustin informed him, very serious. “You guys could totally take that one if you want.”

Huh. Well – okay, that was actually a great song, really romantic. Bill might even have that album. Even so: “Yeah, no, we don't really do that stuff.”

“Okay. So what do you need to do?” Dust asked again. “I could pick stuff up while you're at work! Or, you know, distract Billy while you get everything set up, I am *really* good at that! Whatever you need! I'm your go-to guy!”

Jesus. He actually sounded really eager and shit. It was super weird, and also made Steve feel incredibly bad. “Uh, no, man. I'm not, I mean, I don't need you to do that,” Steve interrupted him.

“What? Why not?” Dustin's face fell right away and he looked like a disappointed little kid. “What, do you have it all set up already?” He got a huge glare on his face. “OH MY GOD, DID YOU GET MAX TO HELP YOU?” he shrieked incredulously.

“No!” Steve said quickly. “It's just, I, uh ... ” God, he was such a total asshole. He hadn't even thought about it being, like, his and Bill's *anniversary* or whatever. Billy definitely hadn't mentioned anything. “Yeah, so we're not ... I don't think we're gonna ... it's, it's not going to be a big deal.”

“Seriously? Why not?” Dust asked again. His face fell even further and he looked all deflated and disappointed.

“Man, because I just ... ” Steve trailed off, unsure of how to say that he hadn't even thought to plan anything. Damn, what was wrong with him? Some people celebrated every month. Not him and Billy, obviously. “I, I dunno, man. You know how Bill is.”

“Yeah, but you guys are still dating. Six months is a long time!” Dust exclaimed. “That's like a whole semester, Steve!”

Steve rolled his eyes. Six months *was* a long time, though. He felt like

such a prick. “Sure. I mean, I know that.”

Dustin regarded him solemnly; Steve gripped the steering wheel and felt extremely scrutinized. It was almost worse than drivin' with his mom. “Okay, uh, really surprised you're not making a bigger deal out of this,” Dust said. “Oh, are you guys not counting it because of the thing with Nancy? Did you, like, reset in June or whatever when you had that fight?”

Jesus H. “No, it's not because of Nancy!” Steve told him, a little harsher than he meant to. “We definitely didn't, ah, *reset* or whatever.” He didn't think, anyway.

He really needed everyone to stop bringing that shit up every five minutes. Also, their fight hadn't just been *because of Nancy*. There had been that whole thing with Bill not wanting people to find out about the two of them: the awful stuff he'd said to Steve and the way he'd treated Lucas. Steve guessed he really hadn't told Dustin about all of that. It was Billy's shit to deal with, and at the time it had felt wrong to talk about it when Lucas had told Steve not to. Plus Billy had been missing and all that shit and Steve had thought he was *fucking dead*.

“Okay. Sorry.” They'd gotten off the main streets now and were heading up the winding four-lane highway that led out to the Hendersons' place. Dustin was still just staring at Steve in this weird disappointed way and making him feel all uncomfortable.

“Can you stop frickin' looking at me like that? It's not a big deal.”

“Sorry,” Dustin said again. He continued staring at Steve all dejected. “I really thought you had some big romantic night planned or something. When me and Rebecca hit six months, my mom cooked a huge dinner and let me light *three* candles in the kitchen! I saved up for two months to buy her a bracelet! For Rebecca, not my mom!” he added unnecessarily.

“What, you did?” This was the first Steve was hearing about it. It was crappy but he wasn't even sure how long Dustin and Becca had been a couple, honestly. Longer than him and Bill at least, he knew.

“Yeah! It was last month, after Fourth of July.”

“Oh. Sorry, man. Congrats. I didn't know that.”

“You've been a little preoccupied this summer.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Steve fell silent and stared out at the road again. “I guess I haven't really been ... I mean, I didn't even think about ... ” He trailed off.

Dustin looked at him some more and then got this real deeply disapproving expression on his face all of a sudden, as if Steve had told him that he'd cheated on a school paper or something. “Wait, did you *forget*?” He actually looked all shocked and shit.

“No, I didn't forget!” Okay. Maybe he kind of had.

“Oh, my god, Steve! Did you seriously not remember?”

“No, of course I remembered!” It wasn't that he'd really *forgotten*, exactly. Steve definitely remembered when he and Billy had first kissed – it had kind of been a big deal for him. It'd been the last day of February; Steve remembered because he'd just done his taxes for the first time earlier that week (Linda had helped him). It had been a Friday and he'd gotten his paycheck which meant it was going to be a good weekend. He and Billy had beaten up Tommy Hall together and then Bill had kissed him behind the comic book shop.

Steve hadn't even known that he'd been wanting Billy to kiss him. But then when it happened Steve realized he'd been wanting it and everything about the last couple months had suddenly made sense. It wasn't like he was going to forget that. “I, I know when we got together. I guess I just kinda didn't ... realize the date or whatever.”

“Seriously?” Dust asked again. He still looked super incredulous and disappointed in Steve; it would almost be kinda amusing if it wasn't making Steve feel like such a dummy. “Wow, Steve. Okay. I thought that you and me shared the same romantic soul, I guess that was just a thing I made up in my head.”

“Uh, yeah, okay, that's super creepy,” Steve told him. “You fruit.”

Dustin scoffed at him. “You can't call me that, you're literally dating another dude.”

"Shut up." Steve flicked his blinker on to make the turn off the highway and onto the little road that would take them down past Dustin's place. "Hey, I mean, I didn't *forget* or anything. It's just that we, we – you know, we didn't even talk about anything when we first started ... uh, whatever. I don't even know if it counts as six months, I didn't know what the hell was going on for half of it."

"I guess."

"And you, you know what Billy's like," Steve continued. He felt like he really needed to justify himself for some reason. "He's not exactly the most – I dunno if he'd want to do some big thing. You can barely get him into a goddamn restaurant." He felt guilty or something after he said it; he and Bill had just gone out two nights ago and it had been great.

"I guess," Dust said again all subdued.

Geez. He was making Steve feel like a total unromantic asshole. Possibly because Steve was in fact, apparently, a total unromantic asshole. "Why do you even care so much?"

"I don't know. Billy's my friend, too."

"Okay, I know that."

"I don't know," Dust said again. "I guess I just – his life has majorly sucked lately, like with his dad and everything. And what happened at the end of school, you know, with El."

"Yeah. I know," Steve said shortly. He definitely remembered all of that.

"I mean, like, he got ABDUCTED and still had to take FINALS!" Dustin continued, making Steve feel crazy. "And it's summer and everything. He's been hanging out with me, he said I can probably make the track team this year! I've lost TWELVE pounds since July!" he told Steve all intense. "I just ... thought you'd do something. And I wanted to help or whatever. Max says you guys are, like, in love, so."

Steve felt his face get really hot; he was glad it was dark out so Dust couldn't see him blushing or whatever. "*What?* Uh, she said that?"

“Uh, yeah?” Dustin stared at Steve like Steve was a total dummy. “So what?”

“Wow, okay. When'd she say that?”

“I don't know. Why? AREN'T YOU?!” Dust demanded like a crazy person.

“Dustin, I don't – God. I dunno! I mean, yeah, I, I guess!” Not that Steve had really *said it* or anything. Because he was, you know, an unromantic asshole.

“Oh. Uh, okay.” Dustin frowned and then shifted over in his seat, a little further away, as if he'd just realized they were having a super-awkward kinda-inappropriate conversation about Steve's boyfriend. He gazed out the window for a moment, absently adjusting his baseball cap and scratching at his temple. This uncomfortable silence fell over the car.

He looked over again suddenly. “But, like – if Billy was a girl, you'd probably do some big thing, though, right? Next week, I mean.”

Jesus. “Uh, I don't know,” Steve said. “What's that got to do with anything? He's not.”

“I guess.” Dustin frowned again, and the silence stretched on. He cleared his throat twice, loudly, which meant he wanted Steve to talk again.

“Okay, what's going on in your weird big science head?” Steve asked him.

“Too much stuff! I don't know!” Dust fidgeted some more. “Uh ... Steve, you know we're not – none of us care that you guys are gay or anything. I – “

“Dustin, I'm not gay,” Steve reminded him, exasperated. Jesus H. How many times did he have to say it.

“Okay, I know, whatever! But I just ... like, you know we don't talk about you guys like it's funny, right? You're our friends. Mike even – ” He stopped abruptly.

“What?”

“Nothing!” Dust said, too quickly, making Steve feel suspicious. “I just meant, if you don't wanna do an anniversary thing because you're both ... guys or whatever, like, I don't think you should feel that way. My mom says every person is deserving of love and acceptance!”

They'd reached Dustin's house; Mrs. Henderson had two porch lights blazing and Steve could see the outline of the TV screen, illuminated in the big front window. “That's great,” he said dryly. “Glad you've been talking with her about this.”

Dustin rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I, I don't know.” He was quiet for a moment, playing around with the handle of the passenger-side door. “I just thought you'd wanna do something for Billy, I wanted to help. Forget it, I guess. Sorry.”

“It's not like I don't want to,” Steve told him. “It's ... yeah, I don't know.” He felt like the biggest asshole in the whole world. It sucked to say it. “I guess I did kinda forget. I didn't mean to get all defensive. Sorry if I was being a dick to you.”

“You weren't, that's okay. Sorry if I made you feel bad.”

“No, man, I ... did that to myself,” Steve said slowly. “I really wasn't thinking about anniversary shit. Now I, uh. Damn, I really don't know what I should do.”

“I don't blame you. Sorry, I support your relationship, but I am really glad that I'm not dating someone like Billy. I don't even know what he would want, maybe like fireworks or a dead animal skull.”

Steve almost laughed; Dust was such an asshole. Actually, the fireworks thing didn't sound too bad. “Yeah, uh, I'll figure something out.”

Somehow Mrs. Henderson turned a third porch light on. Dust sighed heavily and unclicked his seatbelt. “Oh, Jesus Christ, why does she have to do that? It's not even late. Sorry, Steve, I guess I really have to go.”

“Yeah, you're good. See you later, man.”

“Good luck.” Dustin opened up the car door and climbed out, then leaned over the opened window and peered in at Steve. “Well, tell me if you decide to do something.”

“Sure, man. Yeah. I'll let you know. Hey, we gotta hang out before I leave on Friday.”

“Okay!” Dust beamed and looked more like his normal, slightly-annoying self again. “Are you gonna leave your car at Billy's job tomorrow? My mom can probably give you a ride home.”

That sounded so great. “Thanks, maybe,” Steve said, trying to hide his total lack of enthusiasm. “See ya later, okay?”

“Yeah. Bye Steve!” Dustin waved like a goober and headed up the long dark driveway to his house. Steve watched and waited until he'd gotten inside, then backed the car up and turned around, heading back into town. Now he had a ton of shit to think about.

Once Steve had made his way back home it was close to ten, even later than he'd expected. He really had been intending on calling it an early night and just crashing, but his big talk with with Dustin had left him feeling way too wired or anxious or something.

He got himself a glass of water and wandered into the den to sit down, Luke and Leia following behind him, snuffling and chewing on their stupid toys. Usually he'd hang out in the living room or just go upstairs and lay around in his bed. He guessed the den was where he went when he was in a mood or something. It was towards the back of the house and had dark wood-paneled walls and one of those overstuffed couches; it was a good place to hang out if you didn't wanna be around anyone. Or if you wanted to make out with somebody – he and Billy had definitely spent some time in here, too.

Crap. Billy. Damn, but Steve felt like a real jerk. He kept thinking about all the things Dustin had said and then the way he'd reacted to them. It took a lot for Dust to look disappointed in him like that –

Steve must've sounded real callous.

He guessed he'd been pretty defensive over forgetting. Okay, it was super, *super* weird and all that Dustin was apparently so invested in Steve's relationship, but Steve really couldn't believe that he hadn't realized he and Bill had been going together for six months.

Dustin was right and six months was a long time and a big deal. Maybe it wasn't to some people, older people or married couples or shit like that. But it felt like a big deal to Steve. Nobody'd ever wanted to date him for so long, aside from Nancy he guessed, and that had ended so swell.

It was kind of crazy to think that being with Billy was his second-longest relationship. Steve didn't know if that was a good thing or if it just made him pretty pathetic.

No, it was a good thing, he decided after a moment. Damn. It *should* feel good, Steve thought, except for the fact that he felt like total crap right now for not remembering it. Steve didn't really think he and Bill were anniversary-type people but Steve still should have remembered.

He kept thinking about Dust saying *If Billy was a girl, you'd probably do some big thing, right?* and feeling shitty. That was probably true, but Billy wasn't a girl, and he and Steve didn't do the same things together that Steve would do with a girlfriend. Not just the sex stuff and all, but regular couple stuff too. If Steve had made, like, a date with Nancy, and then shown up to her house in sweatpants to watch the Superbowl and drink beer, she'd be pissed as hell at him. With Billy, it would be a great night, even though neither of them was too crazy about football. It wasn't like the time he spent Bill was less important or anything. Steve should have remembered.

He turned the TV on in the den and flicked through the channels, not really looking for anything in particular. It was Monday night so there wasn't anything good on anyway; he'd already missed *MacGyver* and all the comedy shows. He put the TV movie on on NBC and continued laying on the sofa and feeling like a great big jerk.

He wondered if Bill realized that it had been six months since they'd

first kissed or gotten together. Maybe not; he hadn't said anything. Then again, Steve was pretty sure Billy wasn't the type to bring something like that up, anyway. He'd probably scream in horror and run all the way home and lock Steve out of the apartment if Steve made him a fancy dinner with three candles or bought him a bracelet. They *definitely* didn't have a couples' song or anything, Jesus Christ.

Even so Steve thought that he should do something, not just because he felt bad for forgetting. Damn if he didn't feel *really bad*, though. He'd been having such a good time with Billy this summer.

Everything had been so great lately – Billy made him feel really great. He was so hot and amazing. He'd told his stepmom about them and he'd written that college essay for Steve and had made him that awesome mix tape. They were, like, having actual sex now and Bill had said *I love you* a bunch of times (well, maybe four or five, but that counted as a bunch). Steve couldn't even say it back without making a mess of it and now he'd forgotten the frickin' date they'd started going around on. He thought again about how there had been this part of him earlier that hadn't *wanted* to say *I love you* and felt even shittier. The sex thing made it feel way worse somehow too, like Steve really didn't care or something.

He did care; he was just an idiot. He'd have to come up with something really fucking good to make up for it. Okay maybe Billy didn't need to know the forgetting part but Steve should still make up for it. There had to be something he could do or get for Bill to show him how important he was.

Steve fretted and watched the TV. After a few more minutes, Luke padded over to him and snuffled and snorted, pressing his muzzle into Steve's side with his gross rope-toy dangling from his mouth.

“Ugh, come on. Seriously?” Dogs never really stopped. He sat up a little and shoved Luke away, then grabbed his face and scratched his ears hard. “Hey, whatyda think Bill would like for a present, huh?” Luke panted heavily, drooling, and dropped the toy on Steve's chest. “Hmm. Yeah, I don't know about that,” Steve told him. He tossed the rope across the room for Luke to chase.

Okay. They were leaving for vacation on Friday; that meant Steve had about three days to figure out something great. No big deal. He'd pulled off worse, he told himself.

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm trying to do the [tumblr](#) thing again - come say hi!

Works inspired by this one:

- A [Restricted Work] by [blueroses96](#) Log in to view.